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# How Do You Depict the Life of a Soul?: Word and Text in and as Image in Soviet Nonconformist Art

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How Do You Depict the Life of a Soul?  
Word and Text in and as Image in Soviet Nonconformist Art  
by  
Matthew H. Blong

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Word and Text in and as Image in Soviet Nonconformist Art

By: Matthew H. Blong

Visual artworks by Soviet nonconformist artists, especially those associated with the Moscow Conceptualist and Sots-Art movements of the mid-1960s to mid-1980s, prominently feature experimentations with word and text—both in and as image—for a wide variety of reasons that have been studied by scholars of Soviet and Russian art.

In this paper, a formal and conceptual analysis of nearly thirty text-and-image artworks by nonconformist artists of the period traces the motivations and inspirations for this highly creative and generative practice. Beginning with the desire to resume where the historic Russian avant-garde had left off, these artworks challenge notions of language as a set of visual signs, explore their aural properties, reestablish links to Russia's rich cache of poetry and literary narrative, and open conceptual angles—including deskilling, banishment of the notion of individual authorship, and an archival approach—similar to those taken by Western conceptualist artists.

Nevertheless, nonconformist artists' combination of word and text with image reflected and reacted to a set of circumstances unique to life during the late Soviet era, when many Russians had ceased to regard the aims of communism—promulgated by banners, posters, and other state-commissioned artworks rendered in the dominant artistic style of Socialist Realism—as an achievable reality. By including linguistic content in the picture field, Soviet nonconformist artists succeeded in deconstructing propagandistic myths and messages, thereby forging an approach to actual realism that could accurately depict the life of the Russian soul.

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## CHAPTER 1 – CONTEXTUALIZING THE USE OF TEXT AND IMAGE IN ART HISTORY

### Text and Image in Artistic Production

The visual landscape of human civilization has been saturated with the combination of text, word and image for millennia.<sup>1</sup> Examples are plentiful in nearly all stages of world art history, from the cuneiform inscriptions superimposed over Babylonian bas-reliefs, to illuminated Medieval manuscripts, to traditional Chinese ink painting. Whether explicit or implicit, the presence of word and text in a mimetic picture field conveys linguistic content which, although limited to those endowed with the privilege of literacy, nonetheless enhances an artwork's message and underscores essential meaning.

To be sure, much of humanity's visual art production has required no visual adjunct on the picture field whatsoever.<sup>2</sup> However, among the many modes of artistic production that did include text in combination with word and image were frequently the ones that necessitated some sort of collaboration between visual as well as verbal language in the same field to convey meaning.<sup>3</sup> For example, maps rely upon words imbedded in the graphic medium and its message to the degree that words become transfigured as graphic imagery, while the imagery itself, such as the outline of a territory, island or continent, aspires to a condition of linguistic denotation.<sup>4</sup> From the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, when the reproduction of images through various types of engraving and printing became more common, publishers of books and poetry experimented with combinations of text and image in their manuscripts and

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<sup>1</sup> Michael R. Leaman, "Preface," in *Art, Word and Image: 2,000 Years of Visual / Textual Interaction* (London: Reaktion, 2010), 7. *Art, Word and Image: 2,000 Years of Visual / Textual Interaction* (London: Reaktion, 2010), 27.

<sup>2</sup> John Dixon Hunt, "Introduction," in *Art, Word and Image: 2,000 Years of Visual / Textual Interaction* (London: Reaktion, 2010), 27.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 29.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*



popular prints. Nevertheless, the superposition of text (other than the artist's signature) over image in Western "high" art—primarily canvas painting—was generally the exception rather than the norm.

### The Avant-Garde's Use of Word, Text and Image

By the turn of the twentieth century, artistic production in the West would forever be altered by a new wave of introduction of words into the visual field, which, not coincidentally, came at a time when artists were beginning to dismantle traditional ideas of what art had meant for centuries.<sup>5</sup>

The avant-garde movements of this era made an all-out assault on art itself, fundamentally questioning its purpose. Peter Bürger, a noted scholar of the avant-garde, writes that these movements were less interested in aesthetics than they were in redirecting how art should function in society. By challenging established notions of what art could be, they hoped to transfer it "to the praxis of life where it would be preserved."<sup>6</sup>

Excluded from mainstream art production and the sophisticated dealer-critic system that had evolved to support it, avant-garde movements throughout Europe resorted to propagating their ideas through the publication of manifestoes and magazines, where they experimented with new textual and visual forms. Most notable among these were the artists' books of the Italian Futurists, which borrowed heavily from the visual iconography and modern typeface of late nineteenth-century popular advertising, creating a "verbal-visual space that could not have existed prior to the invention of the typewriter."<sup>7</sup> Likewise, artists in the Cubist and (later) Dada

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<sup>5</sup> David Lomas, "'New in art, they are already soaked in humanity': Word and Image, 1900-1945," in *Art, Word and Image: 2,000 Years of Visual / Textual Interaction* (London: Reaktion, 2010), 111.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Bürger, "On the Problem of the Autonomy of Art in Bourgeois Society," in *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts* (London: Phaidon Press, 2006), 58-59.

<sup>7</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture. With a New Pref.* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007), 94.

movements made prolific use of words and text in their images as they sought to deconstruct notions of art as a bourgeois cultural form.

### Word, Text and Image in Conceptual Art

Throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, artists working in geographically and culturally diverse regions on every continent simultaneously—and for the most part independently—chose to emphasize conceptual content in their art.<sup>8</sup> Unlike abstraction, conceptual art did not have a consistent look but rather comprised a series of strategies that lent themselves to multiple purposes, with the use of language being one of the most prominent and generative ones.<sup>9</sup>

Conceptualism was indeed a global movement that, unlike other twentieth century movements (such as Surrealism) that had come before, was a genuinely broad-based trend and not simply something that spread out from the leading art capitals of Paris and New York.<sup>10</sup> A landmark 1999 exhibition at the Queens Museum of Art, *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, curated by Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, established that conceptualism arose and developed independently and in different ways in different poles of the global contemporary art scene—including in the Soviet Union, the region in which this paper will, in further detail, examine text and image as a conceptual development.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that North American conceptual artists played a major role in propagating new approaches to making art, especially art in which written word and text

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<sup>8</sup> Valerie L. Hillings, "Where is the Line Between Us?: Moscow and Western Conceptualism in the 1970s," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 267.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Storr, "Across the Great Divide," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 242.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Wollen, "Global Conceptualism and North American Conceptual Art," in *Global Conceptualism Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*: (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 73.

intersect with image or come to dominate the image itself.<sup>11</sup> Due to the preeminence in the postwar era of the North American economy, and especially its artistic and commercial capital—New York City—assumed after the conclusion of World War II, an era marked by massive wealth creation, the rapid proliferation of consumer goods, and the explosion of mass media forms such as television, without which a complete understanding of Conceptualism's major tenants would be difficult if not impossible.<sup>12</sup> Thus a relatively small group of these artists, among them Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Ed Ruscha, and John Baldessari, deployed a typically avant-garde strategy—complete with manifestos, journals, artist's books, theoretical statements, and an atmosphere of powerful group solidarity riven with contention—thereby setting the theoretical parameters that allowed for conceptual art to transform the landscape of the global art world in an enduring way.<sup>13</sup>

Although conceptual art came to take many forms (and thus a full account of conceptualist practice is outside the scope of this paper), one particularly potent form can be briefly characterized as the result of putting image and text together on the same level; for when a written commentary, the description of a certain art project, or a critical statement is interpreted as replacing the image itself, language comes to be regarded as a dematerialization and hence a decommercialization of art.<sup>14</sup> Other forms involved the appropriation and misapplication of experimental methods and diagrammatic systems inherited from earlier avant-gardes and

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Wollen, "Global Conceptualism and North American Conceptual Art," in *Global Conceptualism Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*: (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 73.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Corris, "Word and Image in Art since 1945," in *Art, Word and Image: 2,000 Years of Visual / Textual Interaction* (London: Reaktion, 2010), 226.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Wollen, "Global Conceptualism and North American Conceptual Art," in *Global Conceptualism Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*: (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 73.

<sup>14</sup> Boris Groys, "Communist Conceptual Art," in *Die Totale Aufklärung: Moskauer Konzeptkunst, 1960-1990* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 30.

bastardized by propagandists and commercial advertisers, who rely heavily on language to convey their message to the masses.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, language as employed by conceptual artists allowed for an expanded forum, in which art could intersect with other fields and bring art and artists into a more vital, effective conversation with society: this was based on the relatively more elastic nature of language as compared with objects and images.<sup>16</sup> Art that displayed an affinity for using language to convey meaning allowed artists to respond to an ever-growing and influential mass media and replace its official information with their own analysis.<sup>17</sup>

Conceptual artists also turned away from the formal concerns that dominated much postwar experimental art and begun to focus instead on the implications of the interdependence of art and language.<sup>18</sup> They expressed their skepticism of art that could not function without words and of objects that depended on discourse for legitimacy, especially since the majority of the writing on the meaning of art at that time was not coming from artists but rather from those with roots in other disciplines.<sup>19</sup>

By the 1960s, the most important hallmarks of conceptual practice—a change in emphasis from object to idea, the prioritization of language over visuality, a critique of the institutions of art and, in many cases, a consequent dematerialization of the artwork—had been in development for some time, but through the conceptualists' practice these were reemphasized to such a great

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Storr, "Across the Great Divide," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 242.

<sup>16</sup> Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, "Foreword," in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*: (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), ix.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Valerie L. Hillings, "Where is the Line Between Us?: Moscow and Western Conceptualism in the 1970s," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 261.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

degree as to essentially redefine their creative nature.<sup>20</sup> All of these allowed the focus of conceptualism to undergo a shift from object to subject. This represented a change in function, purpose and capability, a recasting of the object's status and meaning.

Considering the global social and political trends that began in this protest-laden era marked by student uprisings in Paris and racial tension in the U.S. and continued in various manifestations through the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, art's role as a catalyst, a stand-in for forbidden speech, as well as a vehicle for dissent is not surprising.<sup>21</sup> However, the conditions under which conceptualism and its handmaiden—the written word in combination with image—took place in the Soviet Union were remarkably different than in other parts of the globe, especially the Western democracies, where freedom of speech, the dealer-critic system, and other hallmarks of a burgeoning art market could flourish. Despite the absence of all of those things in the Soviet Union from the mid-1960s to mid-1980s, there arose an important body of work that, by combining text and image, achieved many of the same aims as those of Western conceptual artists, albeit from a different starting point and with different influences particular to Russia's unique history, culture and society.

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<sup>20</sup> Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, "Foreword," in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*: (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), vii-viii.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, vii.

## CHAPTER 2 – CONTEXTUALIZING RUSSIAN ART IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

### The Historic Russian / Soviet Avant-Garde

It is difficult to overstate the importance that the historical Russian avant-garde, which included artists such as Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), El Lissitzky (1890-1941), Lyubov Popova (1889-1924), Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891-1956), Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958), Gustav Klucis (1895-1938), and Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953) among others, had on the development of Western art throughout the twentieth century. It arose in a time when the Russian Empire's dual cultural capitals of St. Petersburg and Moscow maintained close ties and a productive ongoing cultural exchange with the preeminent artistic centers of Western Europe, including Paris, Berlin, Zurich and Vienna. Furthermore, much of the ground that Soviet nonconformist artists broke in their work can be traced back to the legacy of Dadaism and Constructivism.<sup>22</sup>

Among other revolutionary approaches that they took in their practice, Russian avant-gardists took a keen interest in breaking down the border between the verbal and the visual.<sup>23</sup> Prior to Russia's earthshaking October Revolution of 1917, the founders of the Russian avant-garde had begun actively exploring methods of combining text and image: through their collaboration with poets, a highly revered caste in Russian cultural society, they sought to visualize verbal concepts and appropriate aspects of contemporary popular culture, borrowing from such varied sources as folklore, popular eighteenth and nineteenth century woodcut prints known as *lubki*,<sup>24</sup> featuring various illustrations accompanied by descriptive verses or poems [see **figure 1** for an example of a humorous Russian *lubok*], as well as Russia's rich cultural cache of religious

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Storr, "Across the Great Divide," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 242.

<sup>23</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 179.

<sup>24</sup> *lubki* in Russian is plural; the singular form is *lubok*.



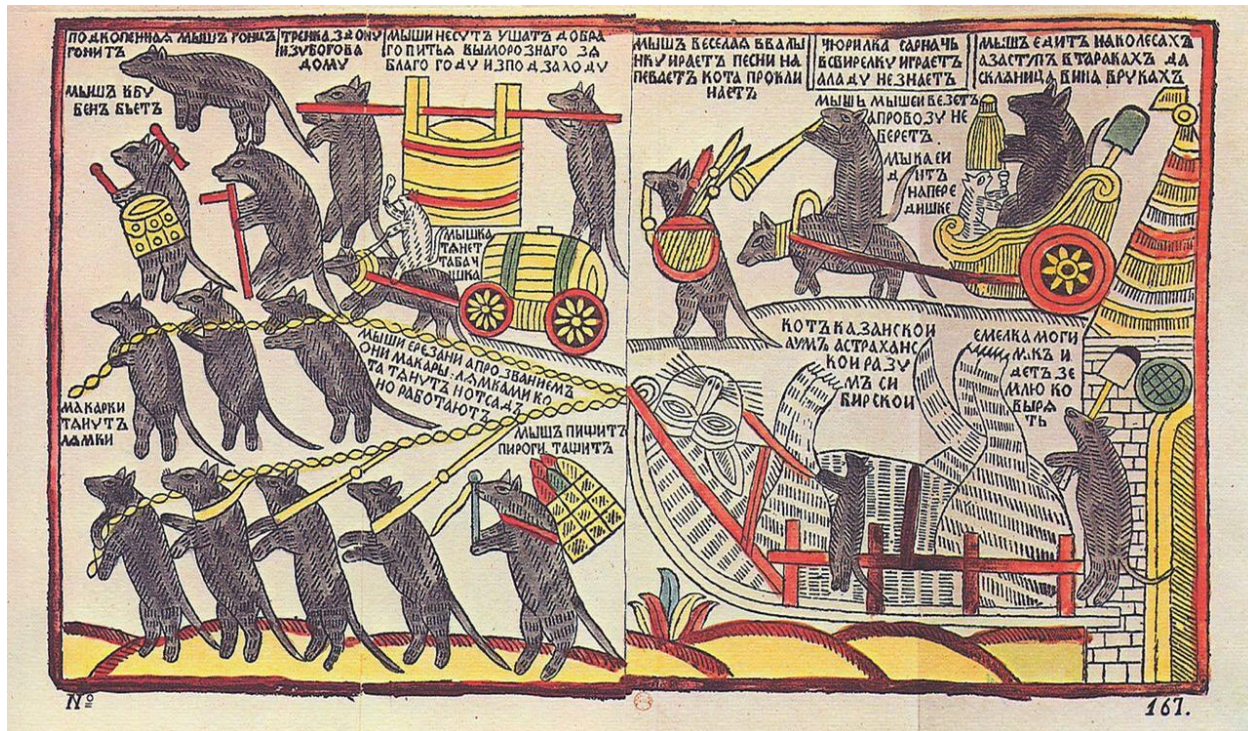


Figure 1: Unknown artist, *The Mice Are Burying the Cat*, (1700s)

icons, covered in Old Church Slavonic inscriptions.<sup>25</sup> Thus the combination of text and image in Russia has been a feature of both “high” art as it was revered in Russian churches for centuries, as well as “low” art, which was sold inexpensively to the masses as a popular form of entertainment or home décor. The avant-garde would seek to break down this barrier even further through their own experimentations with text and image.

After the Revolution, with a new Soviet state established and striving towards a utopian, socialist future, arose a new abstract avant-garde movement known as Constructivism, which employed photomontage as the technique of choice for creating a distinctly non-bourgeois artform—propaganda posters—from which a new idealistic visual language for the masses

<sup>25</sup> Margarita Tupitsyn, “On Some Sources of Soviet Conceptualism,” in *Nonconformist Art: The Soviet Experience, 1956-1986: The Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection; The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum; Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey* (London: Thames & Hudson : in Assoc. with the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 1995), 504.

emerged.<sup>26</sup> Images were combined with slogans and political texts, and every photograph or montage printed in the Soviet mass media was accompanied by an explanatory phrase or short narrative.<sup>27</sup>

By the end of the 1920s, nearly every major Russian avant-garde artist was involved in production of such works for the mass-media, having abandoned traditional forms of “high” art such as painting in favor of cultural programming for the masses, thereby fulfilling the movement’s role of subverting art’s role as a bourgeois cultural form as well as a force for political and social change.<sup>28</sup>

### The Stalinist Period and Socialist Realism

The Russian avant-garde dissipated towards the end of the 1920s as art production in the Soviet Union came under increasingly centralized state authority. At the 16th Party Congress in 1930, General Secretary Joseph Stalin called for art that would be national in form and socialist in content, and he personally approved the term “socialist realism” to describe his preferred style, proclaiming it mandatory for all art produced in the country.<sup>29</sup> Artists were expected to contribute to the establishment of a new Soviet humanity by making narrative paintings and monumental sculptures that delivered an enlightening and uplifting message about the dream of Communism and the glory of the Soviet Union and its heroes.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> David Lomas, “‘New in art, they are already soaked in humanity’: Word and Image, 1900-1945,” in *Art, Word and Image: 2,000 Years of Visual / Textual Interaction* (London: Reaktion, 2010), 111.

<sup>27</sup> Margarita Tupitsyn, “On Some Sources of Soviet Conceptualism,” in *Nonconformist Art: The Soviet Experience, 1956-1986: The Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection; The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum; Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey* (London: Thames & Hudson : in Assoc. with the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 1995), 504.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 36.

<sup>30</sup> Il’ia Iosifovich Kabakov and Amei Wallach, Ilya Kabakov, 1969-1998 (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Center for Curatorial Studies, 2001), 14.



In 1932, the Soviet government disbanded all existing artistic groups and ordered that all Soviet “creative workers” be organized into professional unions, thereby precluding the possible development of any avant-garde or unofficial art scene.<sup>31</sup> By this time, primarily due to seizures of private property and nationalization of assets, the private art market had been effectively abolished as well, and even basic information about art with origins later than the mid-19th century became officially unavailable, as such works were regarded as overly influenced by capitalism.<sup>32</sup>

Artwork featuring text and image, however, remained, as public spaces in the Soviet Union were left with a new generation of propaganda posters and billboards, far removed in style from those of the avant-garde, illustrated in socialist realist style and covered with anodyne political slogans. These would end up, along with many other state-sponsored forms of mass communication, dominating Russia’s visual landscape for years to come.

#### From Khrushchev to Brezhnev: Unofficial Art Development in the 1950s-1960s

Stalin’s death in 1953 allowed for a period of relative liberalization in the Soviet Union under the leadership of Premier Nikita Khrushchev, allowing unofficial artists to begin to emerge in Moscow and Leningrad almost immediately.<sup>33</sup> By 1956, Khrushchev had denounced Stalin’s overwhelming cult of personality in a secret speech given at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and begun to institute practical reforms that would have a major impact on the entire Soviet art scene, even as Socialist Realism remained the predominant and only truly officially endorsed artistic style.

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<sup>31</sup> Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 33.

<sup>32</sup> Renate Petzinger, “Editor’s Preface,” in *Ilya Kabakov: Paintings = Gemälde: 1957-2008: Catalogue Raisonné* (Wiesbaden: Museum Wiesbaden, 2008), 13.

<sup>33</sup> Boris Groys, “Communist Conceptual Art,” in *Die Totale Aufklärung: Moskauer Konzeptkunst, 1960-1990* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 29.

From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, a period known as Khrushchev's Thaw, numerous Western art publications were once again made available for limited review in specialized state libraries.<sup>34</sup> Paintings by Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso borrowed from abroad began to tour the Soviet Union.<sup>35</sup> Although these steps did not come close to returning the Soviet art scene to it the vitality and optimism of the 1920s, they nonetheless allowed for a flourishing of alternative artistic styles that would have been impossible while Stalin, who had called artists "engineers of the human soul," has been alive: this allowed for the cautious emergence of relatively small number of nonconformist artists, working for the most part secretly, who wanted to hand the responsibility of "soul-engineering" back to the viewers of art.<sup>36</sup>

The late 1950s and early 1960s were also a time of remarkable optimism among the generation of Soviet citizens coming of age in the post-war period—a generation that included nearly all nonconformist artists. Technological achievements, such as the launch of Sputnik, and vastly improved living conditions over those of the famine-threatened 1930s and war-torn 1940s, contributed to a general sense that the Soviet state would finally deliver on promises of a radiant future under communism.<sup>37</sup> Khrushchev was so confident in the country's progress that, by 1961, he declared that this goal, prescribed by Marxist doctrine, would be achieved by 1980.<sup>38</sup>

By late 1962, the Soviet art scene had liberalized sufficiently to allow for the organization of a major exhibition of contemporary Soviet non-figurative art at Moscow's prestigious Manezh Central Exhibition Hall just a few hundred meters from Red Square. Featuring the work of Soviet

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<sup>34</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 182.

<sup>35</sup> Il'ia Iosifovich Kabakov and Amei Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov, 1969-1998* (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Center for Curatorial Studies, 2001), 14.

<sup>36</sup> Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 2011), 269.

<sup>37</sup> Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 118-119.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, 221.

abstractionists including Ernst Neizvestny (1925-2016), Yury Sobolev (1928-2002), and Ülo Sooster (1924-1970), the infamous “Manezh” show, as it is now referred to, was extremely short lived: Khrushchev himself attended the opening and, appalled by the what he saw, ordered that the exhibition be cancelled and that the artists exhibiting there be expelled from the Artist’s Union.<sup>39</sup> This would have a chilling effect on the small community of unofficial artists in Moscow, who would not dare to mount a fully public exhibition of their work again for over a decade.

In 1964 Khrushchev was ousted from the Soviet leadership and replaced as Premier by Leonid Brezhnev, whose steady leadership over the next two decades would be marked by the gradual onset of social and economic stagnation. By this time, the failure of the Communist promise could no longer be denied. Brezhnev’s leadership dealt with the lofty promises made by Khrushchev as if they had never been made.<sup>40</sup> The country entered a long and slow period of general disillusionment both with its leadership as well as with the possibility of an idealistic, utopian future.

#### Unofficial Artists in Moscow: 1960s-1980s

The most groundbreaking experimentations with word, text and image were undertaken by unofficial artists living in Moscow between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s. Scholars have retrospectively classified these artists’ bodies of work into two partially overlapping movements: Moscow Conceptualism, whose first generation of artists include Ilya Kabakov (b. 1933) and a loose circle that socialized around him and others working in proximity to his studio on Moscow’s Sretensky Bouvelard; and Sots-Art, spearheaded by the duo of Alexander Melamid

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<sup>39</sup> Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-gardes* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 53.

<sup>40</sup> Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia’s Cold War Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 221.

(b. 1945) and Vitaly Komar (b. 1943)—hereafter referred to collectively as Komar and Melamid—as an overtly satirical Soviet response to American Pop Art. Both movements also overlapped to some degree with other groups, such as Andrey Monastyrsky's (b. 1949) performance-based Collective Actions group, which also experimented with language-based conceptual approaches to art, and all formed part of a greater unofficial Soviet art scene spread widely across the Soviet Union's fifteen constituent republics.

Based on an examination of existing scholarly literature, this paper accepts the premise that the most original and innovative uses of word, text and image were undertaken by the Moscow Conceptualists (especially Kabakov) and proponents of Sots-Art (especially Komar & Melamid) during their time in the Soviet Union in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Although experimentations with text and image also feature prominently in work by other Soviet nonconformist movements, less relevant to the scope of this paper's investigations are the second generation of Moscow Conceptualists (who emerged as young artists on the coattails of the first generation onto a wider, more open artistic scene in the early to mid-1980s), artists of the Lianozovo group such as Oskar Rabin (1928-2018), Leningrad-based nonconformist artists, and performance artists who, like their counterparts in the West, created ephemeral works, of which scant documentation exists, which incorporated language, either written or spoken to some degree.

Because it is more interesting to examine the development of their work in absence of proximate influence of western art movements and markets, this paper will generally refer to works of art—primarily paintings and drawings—completed by Soviet artists before they emigrating to the West, as a great number of them eventually did, albeit at different times, among them: Alexander Kosolapov (b. 1943) in 1975; Komar and Melamid in 1977; Rimma Gerlovina (b. 1951) in 1979; Leonid Sokov (1941-2018) in 1980; Viktor Pivovarov (b. 1937) and Leonid Lamm (1928-2017) in 1982; Kabakov in 1988; and Erik Bulatov (b. 1933) in 1991.

The Moscow unofficial art scene of the 1960s and 1970s was very small: Kabakov claims that among the first generation, there were no more than fifty artists total, with only around twenty-five to thirty active at any one time.<sup>41</sup> All had day jobs within the state-run economy: Kabakov, Bulatov and Lamm worked as book illustrators for publishing houses; Kosolapov and Sokov executed commissions for public sculptures, and Komar and Melamid created propaganda displays for production houses of the Artists' Union.<sup>42</sup>

Recalling Moscow's unofficial art scene in the 1970s, nonconformist artist Irina Nakhova (b. 1955) said:

"Friends met nearly every day, talked a lot, and everyone was genuinely interested in everyone else's work. These relationships constantly promoted work and creativity in our small circle. There was an immediate response to everything that I did. I think that this is an ideal situation for the arts. Remember it was that way because we had no competition other than who was doing the best and most interesting work. The only places to show or see alternative work were at private studios or apartments. There was no art market; there were no art buyers."<sup>43</sup>

In the absence of an art market and any semblance of the dealer-critic system that helped to shape the development of conceptualism in the West, Soviet nonconformist artists were generally creating art for their own personal enjoyment or to share with friends. Like all Soviet artists, who were almost never permitted to travel abroad, nonconformists generally possessed only fragmented and limited knowledge about contemporary art in the West.<sup>44</sup> This isolation kept them out of the loop of the numerous developments in postwar contemporary art in the Western

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<sup>41</sup> Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-gardes* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 9.

<sup>42</sup> Innessa Levkova-Lamm, "Shifting from the Center to the Margins: Moscow Conceptualism, 1980s-1990s," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 103.

<sup>43</sup> Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-gardes* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 180.

<sup>44</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 182.

world, which by the 1970s included a sophisticated circuit of alternative art spaces, biennials, and other critical events – none of which were imaginable in the Soviet Union under Brezhnev.<sup>45</sup>

Nevertheless, visitors from abroad, including a small number of collectors (such as the American economist Norton Dodge, whose collection now comprises the core of the Zimmerli Art Museum's extensive collection of Soviet nonconformist art), supplied coffee-table books, magazines, and exhibition catalogues, as well as eyewitness accounts of developments in art outside the Soviet Union.<sup>46</sup> Nonconformists sometimes socialized with foreign collectors at the apartment of longtime Moscow resident and Greek expatriate George Costakis, employed as a senior official in the Canadian Embassy, who proudly displayed his outstanding collection of Russian avant-garde and modern art at parties he hosted for those on the Moscow diplomatic circuit.<sup>47</sup> Nonconformist artists also gained some insight into conceptual art and other trends in the West through official articles published in Soviet journals condemning the work of Western artists like Joseph Kosuth and the French artist Christian Boltanski.<sup>48</sup>

Yet even without this privileged access to art trends beyond the Soviet Union, nonconformist artists could plainly see that interaction of word and image was a defining feature of modern Western art going back to at least the late nineteenth century.<sup>49</sup> In the exhibition catalogue for *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin*, Russian art critic and scholar Margarita Tupitsyn wrote:

The insertion of linguistic interpretive devices into the visual field provided the critical dialogue lacking in the Soviet alternative art movement from its inception.... If the foundation of Western conceptualism was built in reaction to the overpresence of the

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<sup>45</sup> Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-gardes* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>46</sup> Valerie L. Hillings, "Where is the Line Between Us?: Moscow and Western Conceptualism in the 1970s," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 265.

<sup>47</sup> Margarita Tupitsyn, "Imagine No Shows," in *Anti-shows: APTART 1982-84* (London: Afterall, 2017), 22.

<sup>48</sup> Valerie L. Hillings, "Where is the Line Between Us?: Moscow and Western Conceptualism in the 1970s," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 266.

<sup>49</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 182.

beholder and the critic, then Soviet conceptualism was a reaction to the absence of both.<sup>50</sup>

Although now regarded as the most important Russian artists of their generation, at the time the nonconformists of the Moscow Conceptualist movement were highly marginalized from the mainstream: distanced from the dominant culture of the Soviet system, they tried to create a language to describe this culture, for due to its totalitarian nature and the absence of a system of internal distancing, it was incapable of describing itself.<sup>51</sup>

### End of the Era of Nonconformist Artists

By the late 1980s, largely thanks to Mikhail Gorbachev's twin reforms of perestroika and glasnost fostered openness and a breakdown in censorship, allowing artistic life in the Soviet Union to open up further and benefit from contacts with the Western art world, facilitated by the emigration of many members of the Soviet artistic intelligentsia.<sup>52</sup> Younger artists could now acquaint themselves with the most recent Western art trends, including the New Wave, the Transavantgarde, and the East Village art scene.<sup>53</sup> By the early to mid-1980s, a second generation of Moscow Conceptualists had emerged, and their work was rich with linguistic tricks and conceptual angles that they had picked up both from the first generation of nonconformists as well as from their broadened exposure to global contemporary art trends. No longer isolated from the rest of the world, the Soviet art scene enjoyed a moment of international attention in July 1988, when Sotheby's held its first auction of Russian contemporary art in Moscow,

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<sup>50</sup> Margarita Tupitsyn, "About Early Soviet Conceptualism," in Margarita Tupitsyn, "About Early Soviet Conceptualism," in *Global Conceptualism Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 100.

<sup>51</sup> Joseph Backstein, "The Exhibition *Prospects of Conceptualism* and the Institutionalization of Moscow Conceptual Art," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 150.

<sup>52</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 211.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*

featuring the work of many Soviet nonconformist artists, including many that will be discussed in this paper.



## CHAPTER 3 – APPLICATIONS OF WORD, TEXT AND IMAGE IN SOVIET NONCONFORMIST ART

### Defining Categories of Interest and Links to Art-Historical Bases and the Unique Conditions of the Soviet Art Scene and Society

Between the end of the Khrushchev Thaw in the mid-1960s and the introduction of major political and social reforms under Gorbachev in the mid-1980s, Soviet nonconformists made prolific use of written language—word and text—in or as image in their visual art, creating a fascinating body of work that has since been studied widely by scholars of both Russian art as well as of global conceptual art.

Boris Groys writes that, despite some exogenous influences from the West, where at that time many contemporary artists were also experimenting with approaches to combining text and image in visual art, the origins of this practice in the Soviet Union were rooted in a completely different artistic and sociopolitical reality:

Certainly, the artistic practice of Moscow Conceptualism was strongly influenced by the various trends in Western art at the time, from Pop Art to Conceptualism, which dealt in various ways with the visual world and cultural codes of Western commercialized mass culture. Nonetheless, the practice was not a simple transfer of Western artistic practices to the specifics of Soviet culture. The uniqueness of the Soviet cultural context was that individual artworks were defined almost exclusively by their purely ideological relevance to the dominant ideological-political discourse.<sup>54</sup>

Because there appears to be no one single motivation, reason or inspiration to explain why text and image is such a prominent feature of Soviet nonconformist art, this paper undertakes a close examination of existing art historical and critical literature on the subject and proposes seven categories of interest in this practice's application. Through the categorization of many

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<sup>54</sup> Boris Groys, "The Moveable Cave, or Kabakov's Self-memorials," in *Ilya Kabakov* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 40.

text-and-image works, most of them by Moscow Conceptualists and Sots-Art practitioners and most of which reside in the Nancy and Norton Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union at Rutgers University's Zimmerli Art Museum, the key role of these works in the late-twentieth century revitalization of the Soviet art scene becomes apparent, and there ensues a narrative of the unique circumstances under which this art arose.

At the beginning of this narrative we find a desire to reconnect with—or at least resume the experimentations of—the groundbreaking work of the historic Russian avant-garde (**Category I**), about which many Soviet artists had only limited or passing knowledge. Nevertheless, in a time and place where nonconformist artists were creating non-state-sanctioned work primarily for their own enjoyment, or for a limited audience of trusted friends, their implicit rejection of the state-dominated Soviet art establishment resembles that of previous generations of avant-garde artists, who sought to break down barriers and question the function of art itself.

A key tool in conceptual practice—breaking down and erasing barriers between the visual and the verbal—is the subject of artworks that treat the written word as a visual sign (**Category II**). Rooted in semiotics and philosophy, this angle was explored by nonconformists to various ends, providing them with a tool to deconstruct various questions around identity and meaning that had been obscured during decades of Soviet rule.

Because written language represents sounds and spoken language, it then becomes necessary to examine artists' interest in the aural properties of language (**Category III**). Forging a link back to Russia's rich tradition of poetry and the lyric arts, nonconformists displayed their keen interest in absurdist and other avant-garde poetry to deconstruct the meaning of language, for words lose their meaning when placed out of context or when readers can clearly see that they do not correspond to reality—a reality of life in the late Soviet period as the state-run economy began to stagnate and promises of a utopian future were deferred once again. This applies to both the

private sphere, where the alienation of collectivized housing and a state-run life weighed down on many citizens, as well as to the public sphere, dominated by bureaucracy and propaganda.

Reacting to the visual landscape of a bureaucratically obsessed and propagandistic government (**Category IV**), some artists turned to satire—some more overtly than others—in order to underscore the monotony of standardization and blatant absurdity of many aspects of Soviet life. Many nonconformist artists were, in their day jobs, involved in the production of visual propaganda, for they had been trained to paint and sculpt in a Socialist Realist style. They knew, however, that the narrative of Socialist Realism and, by extension, Soviet art in general had been hopelessly coopted and corrupted by the state; therefore, they sought to return to an exploration of narrative using language (**Category V**). Understanding that a story can overtake and subvert the meaning of art, artists sought to appropriate and apply written narrative in their art, which, given the historical supremacy of literature over other art forms in Russia, allowed them to tell stories in new ways and deconstruct the myths that the Soviet Union had created and which they no longer believed in.

Another reaction to Socialist Realism, which required skilled artisans to depict glorious and momentous moments of Soviet life that nurtured myths created and parroted by the state, was the deskilling by nonconformists of their own work, allowing them, using text and image, to address banal themes and questions of authorship (**Category VI**). An anti-aesthetic approach toward inglorious and commonplace themes, executed without the skill typically expected of an artist, allowed them to further deconstruct myths about Soviet life and the artist's role in it. Lastly, nonconformist artists peppered their visual art with language in order to explore its archival function (**Category VII**), either to memorialize for posterity certain otherwise unaddressed aspects of the Soviet experience, or to hold on to information and inquire into its hidden meaning.

This paper's attempt at classification, however, must not be interpreted too rigidly, for most of the artworks described here can easily fall into multiple categories of interest. Furthermore, these categories, explored in detail below with formal and theoretical explications of several artworks for each category, sometimes overlap generously with one another, further strengthening the argument that the use of text and image in Soviet nonconformist art arises heterogeneously out of conditions unique to the Soviet Union in the late twentieth century.

### Category I: Reconnecting with the Historic Avant-Garde

For nonconformist artists to take inspiration from the historic Russian and Soviet avant-garde and its prolific use of word and text in combination with image comes as no surprise: a reconnection with the work and spirit of the historical Russian avant-garde meant that nonconformists could pick up, where earlier aborted utopian efforts had left off, in terms of removing barriers between various manifestations of art as well as between life and art itself.

Yet not all nonconformists necessarily took the historic avant-garde's example as a starting point. Kabakov has claimed that the majority of Soviet nonconformist artists did not encounter the work of historical avant-garde artists before at least the 1970s, claiming: "I didn't have any contact with this vanished civilization."<sup>55</sup> Whereas among Western conceptual artists, the Soviet avant-garde of the late 1910s and early 1920s could be generatively reinvented as an independent utopian moment, this was far more difficult for Soviet nonconformist artists, who faced the overwhelming legacy of Stalinism, which had almost completely extirpated perceptible traces of this artistic past.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, whereas the avant-garde artists, seeking to change

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<sup>55</sup> David A. Ross and Ilya Kabakov, "Interview: David David A. Ross in conversation with Ilya Kabakov," in *Ilya Kabakov* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 13-14.

<sup>56</sup> Stephen Bann, "Introduction," in *Global Conceptualism Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*: (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 9.

society, were enamored with the idea of incorporating art into life, the Moscow Conceptualists were largely hermetic and uninterested in (or disillusioned with) art's potential to educate or shock the Soviet citizen as the avant-garde had sought to do.<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, the inspiration of combining text and image did manage to trickle down from the historic avant-garde to many nonconformist artists, repairing highly generative discourses that the Stalinist era had interrupted.

One of the most important nonconformist artists to channel the historic avant-garde was Leonid Lamm. As a student at the Moscow Institute of Architecture in the mid-1940s, he had the opportunity to study under Iakov Chernikhov (1889-1951), one of the leading teachers of the Russian avant-garde, who unlike others of his generation managed to escape the purges of the 1930s.<sup>58</sup> Chernikhov shared with Lamm reproductions of major works by Malevich and Lissitzky, the latter of which proved to be a major source of inspiration for Lamm as he matured as an artist.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, as early as 1954, Lamm had the opportunity



Figure 2: El Lissitzky, *Beat the Whites with The Red Wedge* (1919)

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<sup>57</sup> Marek Bartelik, "The Banner without a Slogan: Definitions and Sources of Moscow Conceptualism," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 6.

<sup>58</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 191.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

to encounter the work of Malevich, Vasily Kandinsky (1866-1944), and Tatlin in the storage area of the Tretyakov Gallery; he also managed to gain access to a foreign library in Moscow, where he saw reproductions of other artists not generally available, such as Piet Mondrian.<sup>60</sup>

Seeking to combine verbal and visual imagery, much as Lissitsky had done in his famous poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1919) [see **figure 2**], Lamm's use of words in his drawings reconnected with the spirit of the avant-garde while expressing an ironic attitude towards their idealism.<sup>61</sup> In the drawing *Contractions, Volumes and Flatness* (1955) [see **figure 3**], among the earliest examples of Soviet nonconformists' use of text and image, Lamm's depiction of a three-dimensional plane of constructivist-style geometric abstractions is accompanied by text mimicking the sound of Russian laughter: "kha," "kho" "okhokho," "akhakhakha."

Further linking the work of Soviet nonconformists to the historical avant-garde are the handmade books of Vagrich Bakhchanyan (1938-2009), the first of which he executed in 1963.<sup>62</sup> Works such as *Attention* (1972-73) [see **figure 4**] are text-heavy and make use of verbal play; others



Figure 3: Leonid Lamm, *Contractions, Volumes and Flatness* (1955)

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<sup>60</sup> Valerie L. Hillings, "Where is the Line Between Us?: Moscow and Western Conceptualism in the 1970s," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 270.

<sup>61</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 191.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, 183.

consist of collages, drawings, and texts on wallpaper or newspapers.<sup>63</sup> This approach allowed him to manipulate political and mass-cultural symbolism in a way that would scarcely have been possible without text—the visual language of the mass media—in order to delve into a study of signs and symbols in social practice, how their meaning is born, perceived and destroyed.<sup>64</sup>

By the mid-1970s, other Soviet nonconformist artists, such as Irina Nakhova, who in 2015 became the first female artist to represent Russia at the Venice Biennial, were doing the same. In



Figure 4: Vagrich Bakhchanyan, *Attention* (1972-73)

an untitled work from the mid-1970s [see **figure 5**], Nakhova references the written word as it appears in Soviet mass media, tearing and defacing a newspaper and removing it completely from any outside context.

Nonconformist poet and artist Dmitry Prigov (1940-2007) also experimented with drawing over texts appropriated from Soviet newspapers. Yet a closer look at other work by Prigov reminds us that even more so than the visual arts, the literature—and especially poetry—of the historic Russian avant-garde strongly influenced Soviet nonconformists. As a member of a loosely associated group of Soviet writers known as the Conceptualists (other members of which

<sup>63</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 183.

<sup>64</sup> Ekaterina Bobrinskaya, "Moscow Conceptualism: Its Aesthetics and History," in *Die Totale Aufklärung: Moskauer Konzeptkunst, 1960-1990* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 52.



included Vsevolod Nekrasov, Lev Rubenstein and Vladimir Sorokin),<sup>65</sup> Prigov was familiar with the poetry of the historic avant-garde, whose typographical experimentations were a collision of text and image (like, for example, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1912-14) [see figure 6]).<sup>66</sup> With his typewritten verses, he created a



Figure 5: Irina Nakhova, Untitled (mid-1970s)

series of *stikhogrammy* (or “versographies”), some of which appeared in the journal A-YA in



Figure 6: Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1912-14)

1985. In one of these, *I'm so Jolly! I'm so Cute!* (1985) [see figure 7], both image and text channel the desire to reestablish Russian visual art within a context of multidisciplinary avant-garde experimentation prevalent at the beginning of the twentieth century.

## Category II: The Written Word as Visual Sign

Scholars of Soviet nonconformist art point to the conceptual turn effectuated by the combination of text and image as a technique to erase boundaries between the visual and the verbal.<sup>67</sup> By

<sup>65</sup> Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Contemporary Russian Art* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1989), 81.

<sup>66</sup> Samuel Goff, "Dmitri Prigov: How the Soviet Union Produced a Genre-defying Artistic Mystic," *The Calvert Journal*, accessed September 17, 2018, <http://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/9042/dmitri-prigov-how-the-soviet-union-produced-a-genre-defying-artistic-mystic>.

<sup>67</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 231.



conflating linguistic signs with the images that they stand for, phenomenological interpretation shifts from the aesthetics of the thing to the semiotic concept of the aesthetics of the symbol or sign.<sup>68</sup> Words supplant shapes as the primary signifiers even—or especially—when their connection to a known signified appears to be in doubt.<sup>69</sup> Nonconformists therefore sought to apply this technique in order to deconstruct identity and meaning that had been dulled and clouded under after half a century under oppressive communist rule.

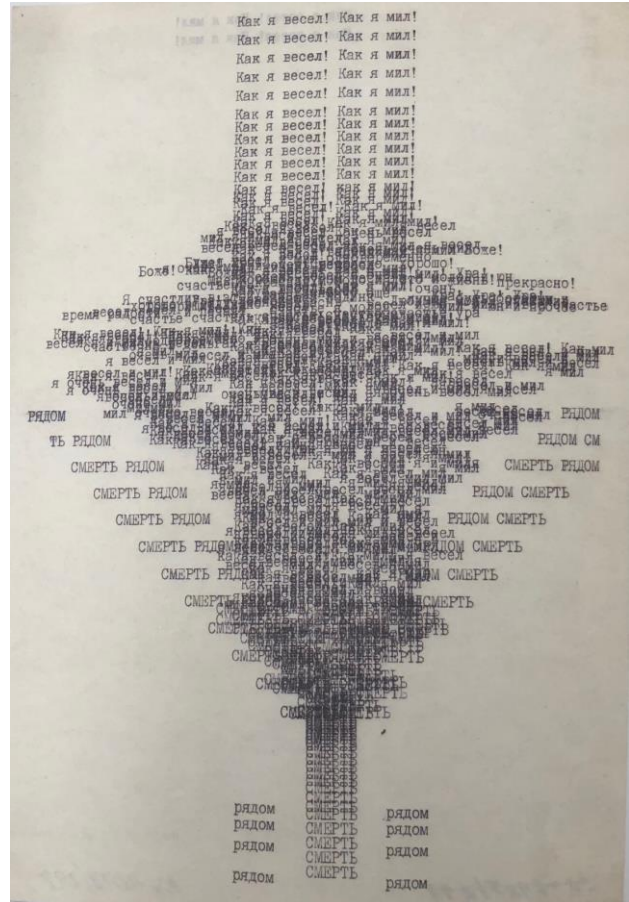


Figure 7: Dmitry Prigov, *I'm so Jolly! I'm so Cute!* (1985)

Channeling a deep frustration of loss of individual identity in Soviet society, Lamm's *I, You, He, She* (1971) [see figure 8] features four identical, colorless, faceless and mannequin-like heads, imprinted with four Russian pronouns that sarcastically mimic a phrase from a popular Soviet song glorifying the unity of the Soviet country and its people ("We are like one family; we consist of 100,000 "I's").<sup>70</sup> The pronouns "I," "you," "he," "she" are rendered in red—the color of official Soviet propaganda—and imprinted onto four heads, which are all colorless, faceless, mannequin-like, and exactly the same. The

<sup>68</sup> Yevgeny Barabanov, "Moscow Conceptualism: Between Self-Definition and Doctrine," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 48.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Storr, "Across the Great Divide," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 242.

<sup>70</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 202.



Figure 8: Leonid Lamm, *I, You, He, She* (1971)

edges of each head are marked with measurements, underscoring the idea of standardization, uniformity, and lack of freedom.<sup>71</sup>

The juxtaposition of linguistic signs and visual signifiers was, of course, not without precedent in Soviet popular

culture, as word and illustration often appeared side-by-side as a device to promote literacy skills among children. Viktor Pivovarov, who worked as a children's book illustrator, has remarked that children's books were a hot collectors' item in the Soviet Union, especially among liberal intellectuals.<sup>72</sup> Such a medium represented not only a conflation of text and image, but also, as is frequently the case with children's books, the conflation of one message aimed at children with another aimed at adults, allowing for a clever obviation of strict Soviet censorship.

Pivovarov's drawing *How Do You Depict the Life of a Soul?* (1975) [see **figure 9**] strongly

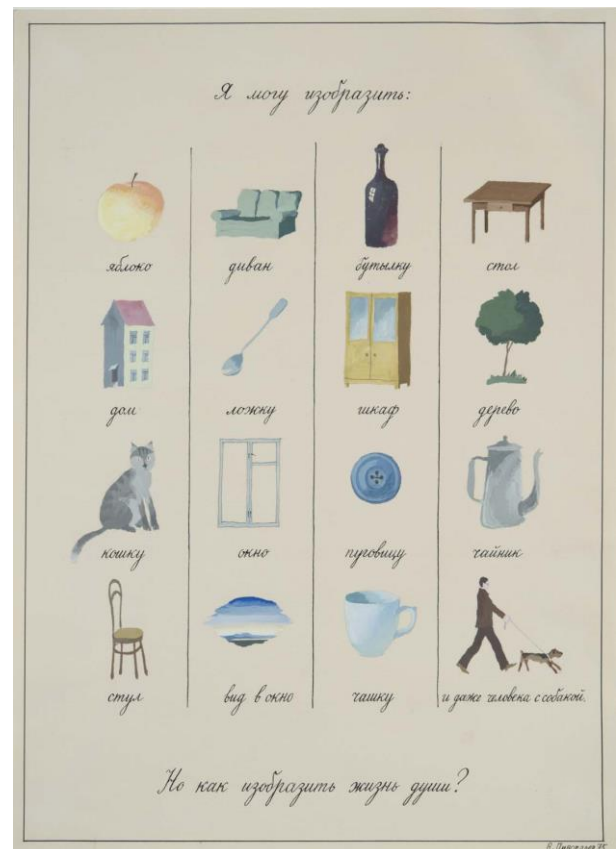


Figure 9: Viktor Pivovarov, *How Do You Depict the Life of a Soul?* (1975)

<sup>71</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 202.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, 189.

resembles a children's primer, featuring a neat grid of sixteen images, prefaced by the words, / *can draw*, followed by the various images accompanied by the Russian words that represent them. At the bottom is written: *but how do you depict the life of a soul?* Characteristically for its artist, the drawing conveys a sense of both familiarity (in its quotidian elements such as an apple, a table, and a man walking a dog) and melancholy. Though skillfully rendered, the images are impersonal and detached both from one another and the artist himself, who seems to lament his inability to depict the soulful feelings that he truly desires to convey through image alone.

With even more pointed criticism of the banality of Soviet existence, Kabakov effectively reduces an entire bureaucratic description of a man's life to a single lowly, deskilled image in his

Ф И О	<b>Сообакин Петр Николаевич</b>			
<b>Родился:</b>				
Родители:	Сообакин Николай Артемьевич. Сообакина Фекла Игнатьевна.	Место рождения:	Рязанская губ. Межевской волости село Черные Трясы, позже село Покровское Горобской вол.	Дата рождения:
				12 февраля 1901 года. (25 февраля 1901 года по новому стилю).
<b>Учился и работает:</b>				
Учился:	Дата:	Работает:	Дата:	Место работы:
Вяземское начальное пригородное училище	1915.	Кочетар	1921.	ст. Кашира Лавловск. ж.д.
Вяземский путевой районок	1935.	Ст. диспетчер	1925.	ст. Сеньки Петровск. ж.д.
Киевский институт инженеров транспорта	1949.	Пом. нач. станции	1936.	ст. Синельниково II
		Начальник станц. Заботышев ИЛС	1945.	ст. Журы Киевской ж.д.
		УССР (отдел перевозок)	1946.	ст. Журы Киевской ж.д.
			1957.	Киев. ИЛС УССР
<b>Дети:</b>				
Сообакин Петр Петрович.	1927.	Металлург-оператор первого разряда		Канинский Металлургический завод
Сообакин Иван Петрович.	1930.	Инженер-конструктор		Псковско-Курское депо
Сообакина Ирина Петровна.	1941.	Старший лаборант-кандидат технических наук		Киевский завод синтетических волокон «Волгодарского»
Примечание:	"Блокинг-оператор" текстильной промышленности и промышленности синтетических материалов.			

**Сообака**




Figure 10: Ilya Kabakov, *Sobakin* (1980)

painting *Sobakin* (1980) [see **figure 10**]. Here a large horizontally-oriented canvas is divided equally, like two pages of a book spread, between two sides. On the left is only text, rendered in a faux-bureaucratic cursive script, that like Soviet internal passports of the period provides biographic information, in this case that of a certain Pyotr Nikolayevich Sobakin: the names of his parents; his date and place of birth; where he studied and worked; and similar information about his children. On the right, the artist has written the word *sobaka* and, as if to underscore the Saussurian nature of the comparison between sign and signifier, a drawing of a dog (which in Russian is the root at the heart of the name *Sobakin*). The entry in Kabakov's catalogue raisonné of paintings provides the following analysis:

In essence here is the entire life of a person, what may remain from him, all that may describe it: dates, names of cities, names of professions. What is the connection between the questionnaire and the actual life of the person in relation to memory, if you consider that any painting is a board of memory? .... To the Russian ear, "Sobakin" sounds not only like something evil and dark, but most likely like something familiar, persistent: "a dog's life." This etymology is precisely what serves as the key to the exhibited painting. This notion unites the narrated life of the person, so long and difficult, and the life of a dog, which in appearance is very simple.<sup>73</sup>

In the paintings of Erik Bulatov, words replace image entirely and become imbued with a powerful spatial presence.<sup>74</sup> In Bulatov's *Stop-Go* (1975) [see **figure 11**], the imperative form of the Russian word for "GO," rendered in light blue paint in a constructivist-style font, is repeated three times. Each instance of "GO" is nested inside a larger one, a powerful suggestion of

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<sup>73</sup> Renate Petzinger and Emilia Kabakov, eds., *Ilya Kabakov: Paintings = Gemälde: 1957-2008: Catalogue Raisonné* (Wiesbaden: Museum Wiesbaden, 2008), 113.

<sup>74</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 190.

forward motion brought to a screeching halt by a large red “STOP,” stretched to the edges of the canvas, behind them, as if holding back the possibility of “GO.”

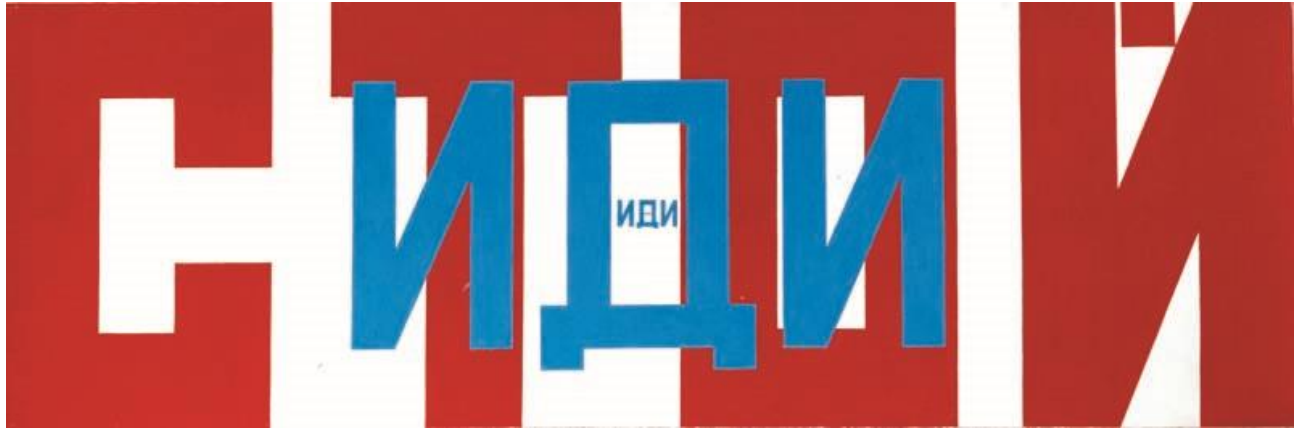


Figure 11: Erik Bulatov, *Stop-Go* (1975)

### Category III: The Aural Properties of the Spoken Word and the Visual Properties of Language

When confronting text in the picture field, viewers read individual letters and words with the potential of unleashing their sounds into the atmosphere. Soviet nonconformists deliberately explored the aural properties of the spoken word to represent language as it is used across the spectrum, from the recitation of poetry to everyday conversations. This technique again appears to be rooted in both the Russian desire to reconnect with the historic avant-garde as well as to channel the power of the nation’s passion and preference for the lyric and literary arts. Highly influential to this end were the poets of the historic Russian avant-garde, especially the Conceptualists, the Futurists, who had collaborated with Russian Constructivists on visual-verbal texts featuring experimentation with typography and photomontage, as well as a Futurist poetry offshoot known as *zaum* (transrationalism).





Figure 12: Leonid Lamm, Mother-Darkness (1965)

An early example of text taking on aural qualities in Soviet visual art can be seen in Lamm's word painting *Mother-Darkness* (1965) [see figure 12]. Representing his fascination with spoken language while paying homage to Malevich, Lamm transforms the avant-garde legend's two-dimensional black square by piercing it with a cross-shaped cutaway section in which the word *mat'* (mother) repeats over and over.<sup>75</sup> The repetition of the word's letters,

however, invites an additional reading: *t'ma* ("darkness" or "torment"), which floats to the tip of the Russian-speaking tongue just as easily as *mat'* when the viewer incants its sound quickly. In another work, *Yes... Hell... Yes* (1964) [see figure 13], Lamm plays on the visual confusion that arises in the picture field between the letters "D" and "A" – *da* in Russian meaning "yes" and *ad* meaning "no."

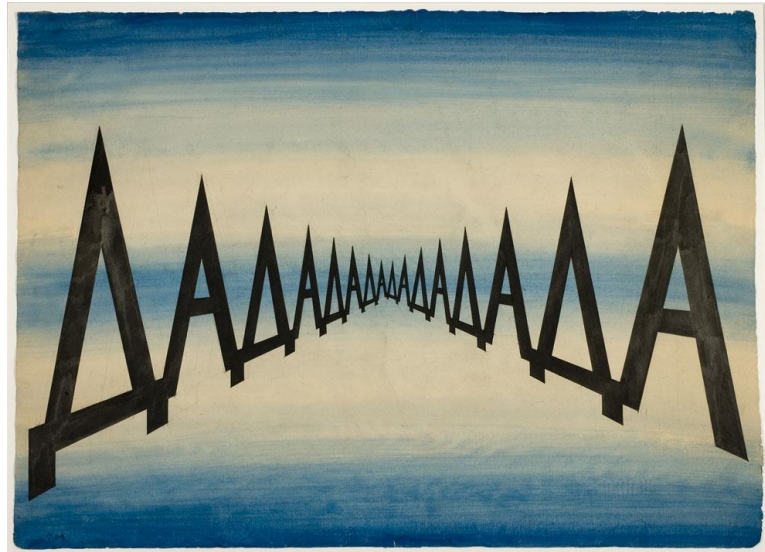


Figure 13: Leonid Lamm, Yes...Hell...Yes (1964)

Lamm's interest in wordplay stems from his familiarity with

Russian Futurist poetry, made possible in part through his friendship with the brother-in-law of

<sup>75</sup> Valerie L. Hillings, "Where is the Line Between Us?: Moscow and Western Conceptualism in the 1970s," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 270.

the founder of *zaum*, poet Velemir Khlebnikov and the writings of authors associated with OBERIU (Association for Real Art), a Leningrad-based group of absurdist writers active in the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>76</sup> Nakhova and others have attested that the Moscow Conceptualists were particularly drawn to the works of OBERIU;<sup>77</sup>



Figure 14: Erik Bulatov, *Sevina Sineva (Seva's Blue)*, (1979)

Pivovarov has noted that,

although officially not available in state-run libraries and bookstores, their work was circulating in Moscow in *samizdat* form by the end of the 1960s.<sup>78</sup> Although the OBERIU poets wrote primarily for children, their poetry and thus their legacy remains fundamental to twentieth-century Russian art and literature.<sup>79</sup>

In *Sevina Sineva (Seva's Blue)* (1979) [see **figure 14**], dedicated to Bulatov's close friend, the poet Vsevolod ("Seva") Nekrasov, a sky-blue picture field intersected by two similar-sounding

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Innessa Levkova-Lamm, "Shifting from the Center to the Margins: Moscow Conceptualism, 1980s-1990s," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 105.

<sup>78</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 182.

<sup>79</sup> Innessa Levkova-Lamm, "Shifting from the Center to the Margins: Moscow Conceptualism, 1980s-1990s," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 133.

words borrowed from one of his poems are juxtaposed vertically, creating an effect of acoustic vibration.<sup>80</sup> Giving the impression that poetry is floating in the air, these texts inhabit a space of their own; for Bulatov they are a unique visual language that can be used autonomously or integrated with other subjects and color combinations.<sup>81</sup>

Boris Groys explains how the poetry of the historical Russian avant-garde, including OBERIU and *zaum*, which had explored language for its sounds rather than its meaning, provided a tool for artists to further deconstruct the role of language in the Soviet Union's public visual sphere:

Khlebnikov began creating his transrational language at a time when the Russian linguistic subconscious was starting to disintegrate. This is the source of his project for a new, magic discourse that would reunite all speakers beyond the bounds of ordinary "rational" language, in which the conflict of opinions, styles and slogans had done irreparable damage and led to the irreversible decline of the previous linguistic unity. In the Soviet period, however, language acquired a new unity, a new linguistic subconscious that had been artificially "drummed in" by the party. The moment they were no longer perceived as such, the party slogans "dominated" the masses, becoming their subconscious, their way of life....The slogans thus became transrational and ceased to bear any definite content, that is, in the terms of formalist aesthetics they were "formalized" and "aestheticized."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 190-191.

<sup>81</sup> Snejana Krasteva, "Erik Bulatov and his contribution to contemporary painting," in *Erik Bulatov: Come to Garage!* (Prague: Artguide s.r.o., 2016), 15.

<sup>82</sup> Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 45.



Where Bulatov took inspiration from the sounds of transrational poetry, Kabakov took his from those of conversations overheard in the kitchens of communal Soviet apartments. Eliminating pictorial images altogether, Kabakov's *Answers of the Experimental Group or Everything about Him* (1971) [see figure 15] is a multi-panel, grid-like assemblage of sentences attributed to



Figure 15: Ilya Kabakov, *Answers of the Experimental Group or Everything about Him* (1971)

dozens of individuals that imitates the language and themes of ordinary Soviet people, amounting to what Margarita Tupitsyn calls “the aesthetic of communal babble.”<sup>83</sup> The characters comment on the life and activities of an unnamed and unseen individual. Reduced to voices speaking about this man, the characters in this work do not address each other, but rather, pulled out of their living context entirely, are rendered as voices of the dead in tombstone-like inscriptions across the grid on the canvas.<sup>84</sup>

Ekaterina Bobrinskaya points out the tension that arises between the sounds of individual voices and that of a communal speech detached from individual authorship, citing the “incursion

<sup>83</sup> Margarita Tupitsyn, “About Early Soviet Conceptualism,” in *Global Conceptualism Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*: (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 100.

<sup>84</sup> Boris Groys, “The Moveable Cave, or Kabakov’s Self-memorials,” in *Ilya Kabakov* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 47.

of communal, anonymous language into the private, personal sphere” as a highly productive discourse among Moscow Conceptualists.<sup>85</sup> Kabakov explores this space further in a series of aesthetically stark paintings from the early 1980s that includes *Inna Gavrilovna Korobova: I tell him...* (1981) [see **figure 16**]. Rendered in a blank, monochrome format, the canvas is penetrated by text representing the voices of a woman in the upper left corner and a man in the upper right. Imagined as overheard in a Soviet communal apartment, where virtual strangers lived in tight proximity to one another, the voices are removed from any meaningful context and do not seem to be communicating with one another. With no non-textual visual content to latch onto besides an open expanse of sky-blue, viewers, alienated from any meaningful narrative in the painting, are left to draw their own conclusions.



Figure 16: Ilya Kabakov, *Inna Gavrilovna Korobova: I tell him...* (1981)

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<sup>85</sup> Ekaterina Bobrinskaya, “Moscow Conceptualism: Its Aesthetics and History,” in *Die Totale Aufklärung: Moskauer Konzeptkunst, 1960-1990* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 58.

#### Category IV: Reaction to the Ubiquity of Soviet Propaganda and Bureaucracy

By inserting language into their visual art, nonconformist artists did more than simply satirize the dysfunction and absurdity of the Soviet system: for much as pop artists in the United States had reacted to the overproduction of consumer goods, Soviet artists in the era of Brezhnev's stagnation reacted to the overproduction of propaganda and bureaucracy, to which end the Russian language had been misappropriated, depersonalized, and debased by the oppressive, monolithic, bureaucratically-administered institution of the state. Yet unlike in the West, where Pop Art appropriated popular culture forms from the masses, Boris Groys claims that there was no distinction between commercialized mass culture and institutionalized high culture in the Soviet Union: "Soviet culture was uniform—and it was exclusively institutional in character."<sup>86</sup>

Because they were being constantly bombarded with propaganda, Soviet citizens were skeptical of the publicly displayed written word, which could not appear in print until approved by censors.<sup>87</sup> They also treated visual imagery—particularly when it involved visual language—with great caution, based on the long-standing approach that Russians have had to their artistic traditions, which traditionally value the achievements of writers and poets over those of painters and sculptors.<sup>88</sup> Using word, text and image, artists could respond to the Soviet bureaucracy, which they had come to distrust, by appropriating the space of media (which was already saturated with its own text and image) and replacing it with their own analysis.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Boris Groys, "Communist Conceptual Art," in *Die Totale Aufklärung: Moskauer Konzeptkunst, 1960-1990* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 32.

<sup>87</sup> Marek Bartelik, "The Banner without a Slogan: Definitions and Sources of Moscow Conceptualism," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 6.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, "Foreword," in *Global Conceptualism Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*: (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), ix.

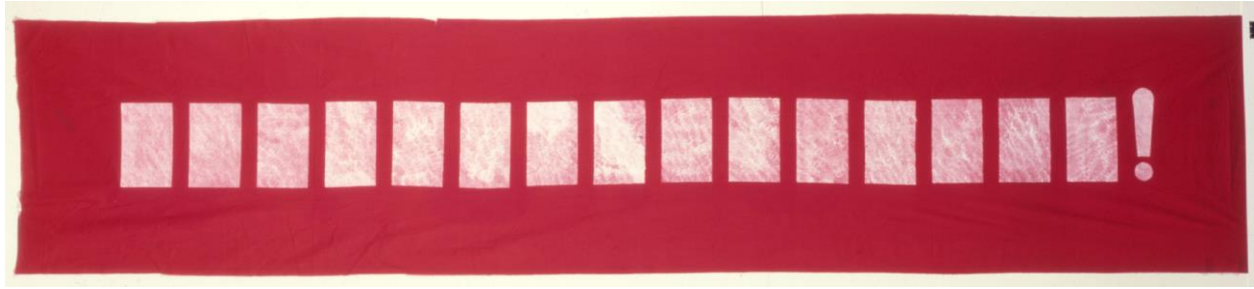


Figure 17: Komar and Melamid, *Ideal Slogan* (1972)

From the early 1970s, Komar and Melamid created a series of a series of red cloth banners, much like those with white lettering in tempera featuring standardized Soviet slogans, like “Our Goal is Communism.”<sup>90</sup> Signing their name to these statements, they both challenged the authenticity and originality of similar banners that dominated the visual landscape of public spaces while calling attention to the interchangeability and ultimate meaninglessness of such slogans.<sup>91</sup> *Ideal Slogan* (1972) [see **figure 17**] takes this concept to its logical extreme, suggesting that Soviet viewers had become so desensitized to ubiquitous propaganda that its message, painted in identical blocks of non-text, could no longer be interpreted, underscoring the discrepancy between the glorious future promised by these banners and other official forms of communication, and the grim, standardized reality of life under the Soviet system.<sup>92</sup>

Komar further underscores the influence of the historic avant-garde on his and Melamid's work and the conceptual direction that it opened:

The art of slogans has existed since the time of the Russian avant-garde. This went unnoticed, although slogans were everywhere. Nobody collected them because they were an ephemeral art of visual propaganda everybody was already sick of. We were the first to pay attention to them: we understood that we were surrounded by conceptual

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<sup>90</sup> Valerie L. Hillings, “Where is the Line Between Us?: Moscow and Western Conceptualism in the 1970s,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 271.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*

culture.<sup>93</sup>

Together with Komar and Melamid, who viewed the visual language of the Soviet mass media not merely as kitsch or a vehicle for bureaucratic manipulation and state propaganda, but rather as a rich field of stereotypes and myths which would be used to deconstruct the myths of Soviet propaganda, Erik Bulatov addressed the oversupply of propagandistic language head-on by appropriating it for use together with his own Socialist Realist-style paintings.<sup>94</sup> He did so with a standard font, which he describes as “the most common font, that I used to see everywhere around me... the most primitive font possible but it is also our heritage from the avant-garde.”<sup>95</sup>

One of Bulatov’s most notable early paintings is *Danger* (1972-73) [see **figure 18**]. A square canvas (perhaps a reference to Malevich) featuring a bucolic scene of a tree-covered meadow bisected by a creek with picnickers (perhaps a reference to Manet’s *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*), the work is disturbed by the repetition of the word *OPASNO* (“danger”) four times in red letters in the shape of a



Figure 18: Erik Bulatov, *Danger* (1972-73)

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<sup>93</sup> Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, “Selling Warhol’s Soul: Excerpts from an Interview with Vitaly Komar Conducted by Julia Tulovsky,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 341.

<sup>94</sup> Margarita Tupitsyn, *Margins of Soviet Art: Socialist Realism to the Present* (Milan: Giancarlo Politi Editore, 1989), 61-64.

<sup>95</sup> Erik Bulatov and Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Interview: Capital Letters,” in *Erik Bulatov: Come to Garage!* (Prague: Artguide s.r.o., 2016), 38-43.



square bent slightly inward.<sup>96</sup> Borrowed from signage on railway platforms painted by professional limners, this word warns viewers of potential injury or death, even as the picture field contains nothing to suggest that. Suggesting that this disconnect reflected on the dysfunction of Soviet society, Bulatov says:

During the Soviet period, the whole society seemed wrong. We had the impression that the art, the culture, and even the true Russian language had been left in the past. The artists who offered an alternative to the official art, instead of being themselves, tried to appear as ideal artists who were able to revive these deficiencies. This ideal artist could not be touched by the social Soviet reality, with its lies and propaganda.<sup>97</sup>

Metaphors for the oppressiveness of Soviet reality, the phrases in Bulatov's paintings, appropriated directly from the Soviet visual landscape, act as titles and are incorporated into them. Another relevant example is *Don't Lean* (1987) [see **figure 19**], which depicts an otherwise unremarkable view of an agricultural field, trees and sky bisected horizontally by the words *НЕ ПРИСЛОНЯТЬСЯ*, which have long been stenciled in identical font on the doors of every subway car in Russia.



Figure 19: Erik Bulatov, *Don't Lean* (1987)

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<sup>96</sup> Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-gardes* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 117.

<sup>97</sup> Damien Sausset, "'Live and See.' Interview with Erik Bulatov by Damien Sausset, Paris, 1 September 2007," in *Train-Train* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2007), 24.

Given his practical experience as a professional illustrator, Pivovarov took inspiration from the bureaucratically mandated signage, diagrams and billboards of the Soviet visual landscape (regarded not as art but rather as tools for educational or propagandistic purposes), in which the primary aesthetics were “an economical, condensed, and detached manner of expressing ideas; an impersonal style; and a sense of alienation, of distance between the author and his work.”<sup>98</sup> In perhaps his most overtly satirical early work, *Projects for a Lonely Man* (1975), Pivovarov investigates how a text

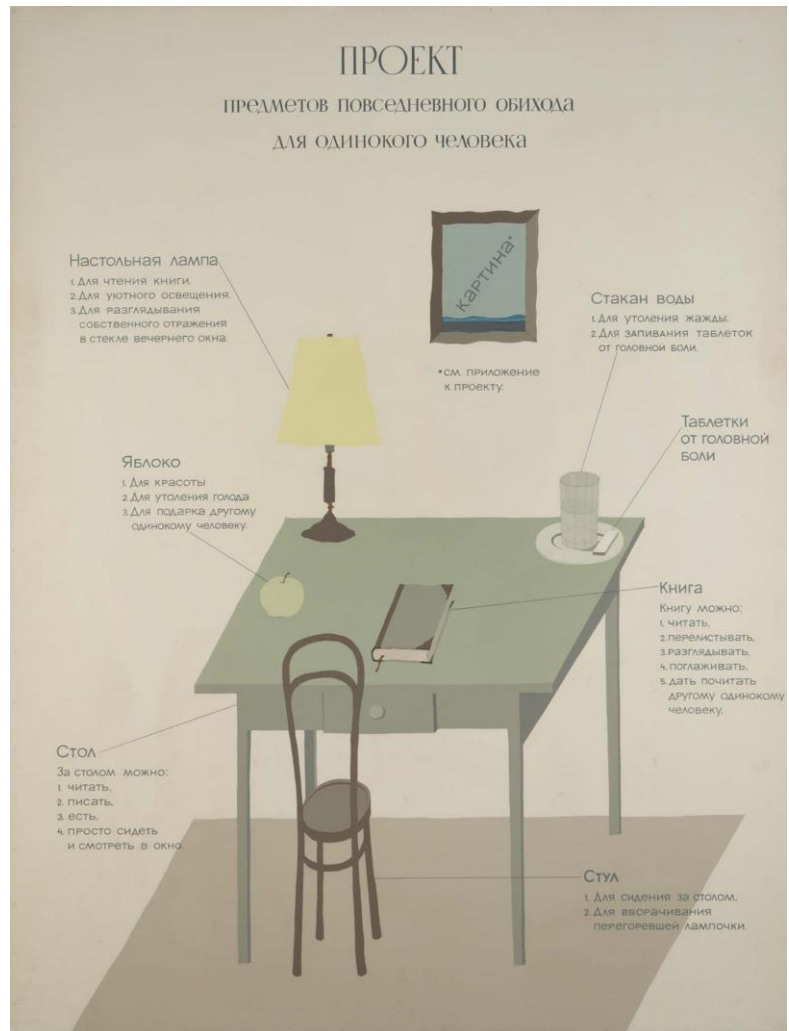


Figure 20: Viktor Pivovarov,  
*Plan for the Everyday Objects of a Lonely Man* (1975)

caption can transform the character of an image.<sup>99</sup> Stylistically resembling an instruction manual or a schematic diagram, which were commonplace in the Soviet Union (given the fact that standardized mechanical devices were everywhere whereas specialized repairmen were not, requiring every Soviet worker to embrace a do-it-yourself attitude), the drawing *Plan for the Everyday Objects of a Lonely Man* (1975) [see **figure 20**] depicts such ordinary objects as a

<sup>98</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, “Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 190.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*

desk, chair, lamp and picture frame, all annotated with bland, superfluous information about how each item can be used.<sup>100</sup> Beyond the sense of loneliness and melancholy brought on by the sparse furnishings in the drawing, the text adds a layer of absurdity that satirizes both formally and thematically the standardization of everyday Soviet life.

#### Category V: Exploring Narrative in Visual Art with Language

Literature has long been an integral part of Russian culture, so much so that the lyric and literary arts have long held supremacy over the visual arts in Russian culture.<sup>101</sup> Unfortunately, the legacy of Socialist Realism, which sought to relay to the masses a politically progressive and ideologically sanitized narrative, caused the Russian visual arts of the twentieth century to lag even further behind its literature, as well as behind the visual arts of other countries.<sup>102</sup>

Scholar Yevgeny Barabanov writes: “As opposed to the world of “pure forms” of the avant-garde, the sin of ‘illustrative literariness,’ of literary narration subordinated to the objectives of propaganda, was considered the original sin of Socialist Realism.”<sup>103</sup>

Nevertheless, the exploration of narrative in their art was practically inevitable for nonconformists, many of whom worked for publishing houses as illustrators and who, like other educated Soviet citizens at large, read both poetry and prose prolifically. Scholar Robert Storr writes:

A nation perpetually at odds with itself but enthralled by an eschatology of perfection, Russia was the birthplace and principal subject of Gogol, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Anton Chekhov, Isaac Babel, Mikhail Zoshchenko, and a host of writers whose specialty was

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<sup>100</sup> For example, the book on the desk is annotated: *Book. You can 1) read it; 2) leaf through it; 3) examine it; 4) gently stroke it; 5) give it to another lonely person.*

<sup>101</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, “Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 178.

<sup>102</sup> Robert Storr, “Across the Great Divide,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 244.

<sup>103</sup> Yevgeny Barabanov, “Moscow Conceptualism: Between Self-Definition and Doctrine,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 62.



describing that nation's contradictions from the vantage point of its lesser citizens.<sup>104</sup>

Following in the footsteps of great Russian literary traditions, Moscow Conceptualists conceived of an original way of using language in their art: by weaving fictional narratives around mythical characters, they, as artists, could remain alienated enough from their own work to preclude the possibility of being identified with it.<sup>105</sup> These characters they created were often artists and thus served as stand-ins for themselves, often interpreting, usually in a playful manner, the myths of the avant-garde, totalitarian culture, or official Soviet art.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Robert Storr, "Across the Great Divide," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 255.

<sup>105</sup> Ekaterina Bobrinskaya, "Moscow Conceptual Performance Art," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 163.

<sup>106</sup> *ibid*, 163-164.



Figure 21: Komar and Melamid, *Apelles Ziablov* (1973), installation view

In the early 1970s, Komar and Melamid painted several muddy, opaque canvases in the name of a purported eighteenth century abstract painter named Apelles Ziablov. Presented in gilded frames as quasi-historical artifacts, the installation *Apelles Ziablov* (1973) [see **figure 21**] is accompanied by pages of faux art reviews and archival materials (typically presented in a vitrine) that document the exceptional discovery of work by a lowly Russian serf who pioneered a radically new approach to art in Czarist Russia.<sup>107</sup> The premise and absurdity of such a conceptual work is not difficult to grasp: nonconformist artists themselves, after all, were taking radical steps to rewrite Russian art history of the twentieth century as Komar and Melamid, among the first to invent an alter ego to stand in for them, were doing for the fictional Ziablov in

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<sup>107</sup> Ekaterina Bobrinskaya, "Moscow Conceptual Performance Art," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 164.

his era.<sup>108</sup> In this case, however, Komar and Melamid underscore the power of narrative—whether true or false—to wholly overtake a work of visual art and subvert its meaning (indeed, it is the accompanying text and documentation of Ziablov’s canvases that convey the bulk of the work’s meaning.)

Allowing their visual art to “speak” with language also allowed nonconformist artists to fashion worlds substituting for the grim reality of daily Soviet life. A seminal work in the canon of Russian nonconformist art, Kabakov’s *Ten Characters* (1970-1975) [see figure 22] is a series of nearly four hundred text-inscribed drawings that, originally intended as an artist’s book or a set of albums, in 1988 was reconceived as a pioneer among Kabakov’s large-scale installations at Kabakov’s first major New York show at Ronald Feldman Gallery.

Evocative of Russian literary traditions that chronicle the lives of saints, psychological dramas, and especially the tragicomic Nikolay Gogol, each album in *Ten Characters* tells the story of one of ten doomed dreamers or would-be artists.<sup>109</sup> With disorienting



Figure 22: Ilya Kabakov, *Ten Characters* (1970-75), installation view

effect, an internal dialogue in each album takes places between the text, the visual field and the voice of the “character,” who nevertheless escapes visual representation in the drawing.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Robert Storr, “Across the Great Divide,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 253.

<sup>109</sup> Il’ia Iosifovich Kabakov and Amei Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov, 1969-1998* (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Center for Curatorial Studies, 2001), 15-16.

<sup>110</sup> Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-gardes* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 142.

Kabakov creates both an exceptional intimacy with the viewer through the contact with the turning pages as well as a temporal experience that opens up devices such as plot, denouement, rhythm and finale that are not typically found in visual art.<sup>111</sup>

On *Ten Characters* Boris Groys writes:

Kabakov's pictures each evoke memories of a story, a theme, a life situation captured in a programmatically dead, bureaucratic form. The irony of such a representation is reinforced by the fact that his works play with the visual and textual clichés of the Soviet bureaucratic apparatus, whose out-of-touch absurdity—at least to all Soviet viewers of these pictures—was extremely familiar.<sup>112</sup>

Although the 1988 installation at Ronald Feldman Gallery was set up on partitions as a horizontal storyboard, inviting the viewer to walk through each story, subsequent installations of *Ten Characters* have included a table, chair, and lamp for each album to allow the viewer to experience it as originally intended in Kabakov's Moscow studio.<sup>113</sup> Although a full reading of all albums can take over two hours, Moscow Conceptualists refer to this work as Kabakov's masterpiece: indeed, the narrative dimension of his work has few if any real corollaries in European or American art.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, since the early 1990s, Kabakov's concept of "total installation" has grown even more ambitious, bringing him worldwide fame and praise on global contemporary art circuits.

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<sup>111</sup> Il'ia Iosifovich Kabakov and Amei Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov, 1969-1998* (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Center for Curatorial Studies, 2001), 27.

<sup>112</sup> Boris Groys, "The Moveable Cave, or Kabakov's Self-memorials," in *Ilya Kabakov* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 47.

<sup>113</sup> Il'ia Iosifovich Kabakov and Amei Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov, 1969-1998* (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Center for Curatorial Studies, 2001), 15-16.

<sup>114</sup> Robert Storr, "Across the Great Divide," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 255.

By the mid-1970s, Pivovarov had also become fascinated by the mystical and theatrical effect of the album format: home demonstrations of his work would involve five or six viewers seated in chairs around an easel with an album, whose text-and-image-laden pages Pivovarov would turn, eliciting ecstatic responses and prompting philosophical discussions.<sup>115</sup> Underscored by a mood of existential wonder, Pivovarov's album *Face* (1975) grapples with issues of identity, detachment and solitude.<sup>116</sup> The front profile man's head in front of a light blue background (which, as in other works by Pivovarov, represents the psyche) seems to speak as the text of the album's pages is read aloud, inquiring, *But do you remember my face?*<sup>117</sup> [see figure 23.]



Figure 23: Viktor Pivovarov, *But do you remember my face?* from the album *Face* (1975)

<sup>115</sup> Pavel Peppershtein and Vatslav Glotser, *Viktor Pivovarov*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Moscow: Artguide Editions, 2014), 19.

<sup>116</sup> *ibid.*, 59.

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*



Obscured, undrawn or masked completely within its head's immutable silhouette in every iteration, the man's face, as if seen in a dream, remains agonizingly unidentifiable until the album's final four pages, by which time it disappears entirely. The final text reads: "I still nurture the hope that we will meet somewhere, sometime and you will certainly recognize me and may even recall my face." Thus, the text in both Kabakov's and Pivovarov's albums takes on a sense of anonymity, or even group identity, in which the artist's individuality is lost among faceless voices.<sup>118</sup>



Figure 24: Svetlana Kopystyanskaya, *Untitled* (1985)

In the paintings of Svetlana Kopystyanskaya<sup>119</sup> (b. 1950), narrative text itself in its universality and discreteness becomes the deconstructed image.<sup>120</sup> In a series of works begun in the mid-1980s, including *Untitled* (1985) [see figure 24], Kopystyanskaya writes texts from nineteenth-

<sup>118</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 188.

<sup>119</sup> Also known since her emigration to the West as Svetlana Kopystyansky.

<sup>120</sup> Yevgeni Barabanov, "Art in the Delta of Alternative Culture, in *Forbidden Art: The Postwar Russian Avant-Garde* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1998), 43.

century Russian authors directly onto her canvases, inviting the viewer to see narrative itself as visual material, rather than a vehicle for linguistic meaning.<sup>121</sup>

Kopystyanskaya has said that her artistic process comprises the deconstruction, rather than destruction, of text and narrative, resulting in a kind of history that cannot be read clearly, as if censored, which was all too common in the Soviet Union. In an early 1990s interview, Kopystyanskaya said:

I always had a feeling of the absurdity of the situation, that I lived in an absurd universe complete with lies and that you had to be deceptive in order to survive. All this was reflected in my work, in which I tried to transform the culture into objects. I used... books without titles for decorative purposes—books as façade. I often had this kind of feeling about books, especially when I would walk into a bookstore filled with them, but I couldn't find the book I was looking for. Or the book would be there, but half the text would be censored out. It meant that you read what you found—a whole book or half a book. It meant that the books had been transformed into political commodities.<sup>122</sup>

Encompassing the handwritten text of a novel, story or play, each of Kopystyanskaya's paintings takes on a persona—an objective reality and medium for cultural information—while retaining a sacramental mystery, symbolized by folds in the canvas that conceal illegible lettering.<sup>123</sup> Words and sentences disappear almost completely into the undulating shape of the canvas. Losing its meaning completely, the text becomes desemanticized, transforming into a landscape motif that the viewer perceives only from a distance.<sup>124</sup> The text itself is only

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<sup>121</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 210.

<sup>122</sup> Renee Baigell, "Interview with Svetlana Kopystyanskaya and Igor Kopystyansky," in *Soviet Dissident Artists: Interviews after Perestroika* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 349-50.

<sup>123</sup> Yevgeni Barabanov, "Art in the Delta of Alternative Culture," in *Forbidden Art: The Postwar Russian Avant-Garde* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1998), 43.

<sup>124</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 210.

recognizable from a closer distance, and only at very close hand do the words constituting the landscape become even remotely legible.<sup>125</sup>

#### Category VI: Deskillling, Banality and the Banishment of Individual Authorship

Soviet nonconformist artists employed word, text and image in combination with a variety of techniques, including deskillling, a focus on banal themes, and the banishment of individual authorship, thereby dematerializing their art. Such dematerialization does not always necessitate the disappearance of the object, but rather a redefining of the role of the object as a carrier of meaning, the reinvestment of meaning in preexisting objects, and—key to the inclusion of linguistic material—the attempt to eliminate the erosion of information.<sup>126</sup> Soviet nonconformists were also generally aware that creating art without the application of prerequisite skill, which they had acquired as professional state-employed artists, was a way of breaking down distinctions between art and non-art, culture and non-culture, as well as removing the hand of the artist from the artwork.

As an extension of their reaction to the domination of Socialist Realism, which had long been dominated by a nonindividual character that made any claim to individual authorship implausible,<sup>127</sup> nonconformists sought to deny painting's privileged status by introducing elements of ubiquitous Soviet kitsch, including the formal language of the Soviet bureaucracy, into their artworks.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, as previously demonstrated, the deliberately deskillled and

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<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, "Foreword," in *Global Conceptualism Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*: (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), viii.

<sup>127</sup> Boris Groys, "The Utopia of Painting," in *Ilya Kabakov: Paintings = Gemälde: 1957-2008: Catalogue Raisonné* (Wiesbaden: Museum Wiesbaden, 2008), 32.

<sup>128</sup> Margarita Tupitsyn, "About Early Soviet Conceptualism," in *Global Conceptualism Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*: (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 99.



anti-aesthetic visual poetics of their work could enhance the anonymity of the artist, whose individuality is lost among verbal statements or comments issues by faceless voices.<sup>129</sup>

Scholar Alla Rosenfeld refers to this as “the deliberate banishment of the notion of individual authorship,”<sup>130</sup> a concept similar to what philosopher Roland Barthes explored in his highly influential text *Death of the Author* (1967). Rooted in the avant-garde, particularly the black square of Malevich’s Suprematism, which sought to eliminate every individual artistic style and taste and create a new collective style for the communist humanity of the future, this notion of banishment of individual authorship passed through Socialist Realism, which also sought to create an anonymous, collective style.<sup>131</sup>

Kabakov realized by the early 1970s that the central artistic issue for him was one of authorship.<sup>132</sup> By renouncing it along with the skill expected of a professional artist, he could, somewhat ironically, become a total author, creating space for infinite outside commentaries, such as those in works explained above and transform them into heroes for his visual and literary narrative.<sup>133</sup>

Kabakov’s *Hello, Morning of Our Motherland* (1981) [see **figure 25**] is a triptych containing six blurry, somewhat poorly rendered Socialist Realist-style paintings that depict various scenes of daily life in the Soviet Union, with the title’s text laid over it in faux-stylized handwriting style that parodied the script of Soviet bureaucrats who filled out forms, passports and other official

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<sup>129</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, “Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 188.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Boris Groys, “The Utopia of Painting,” in *Ilya Kabakov: Paintings = Gemälde: 1957-2008: Catalogue Raisonné* (Wiesbaden: Museum Wiesbaden, 2008), 32.

<sup>132</sup> Boris Groys, *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010), 109.

<sup>133</sup> Boris Groys, “The Moveable Cave, or Kabakov’s Self-memorials,” in *Ilya Kabakov* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 47.

documents in longhand;<sup>134</sup> the paintings (some of which, such as the top-center one of the soccer game at Dynamo Stadium in Moscow, are more skillfully painted) are further captioned with text describing each image's location and subject. Kabakov attributes the work to two or more fictional, unknown professional artists who have painted them for public display for the occasion of a holiday, special event or official degree commemorating a solemn occasion.<sup>135</sup>

The panels—total stylistic borrowings from garden-variety Socialist Realism—are both unsigned and unaddressed: Soviet viewers would have been familiar with similar panels painted by anonymous artistic workers with varying degrees of skill and apathy to the subject at hand. The result, as Kabakov explains, is a “dreadful mix of obvious hack-work, simple lack of skill, and bright flashes here and there of artistic premonitions and illuminations.”<sup>136</sup> The work's linguistic content—in this case the language of anonymous street production, drawn and painted by state-

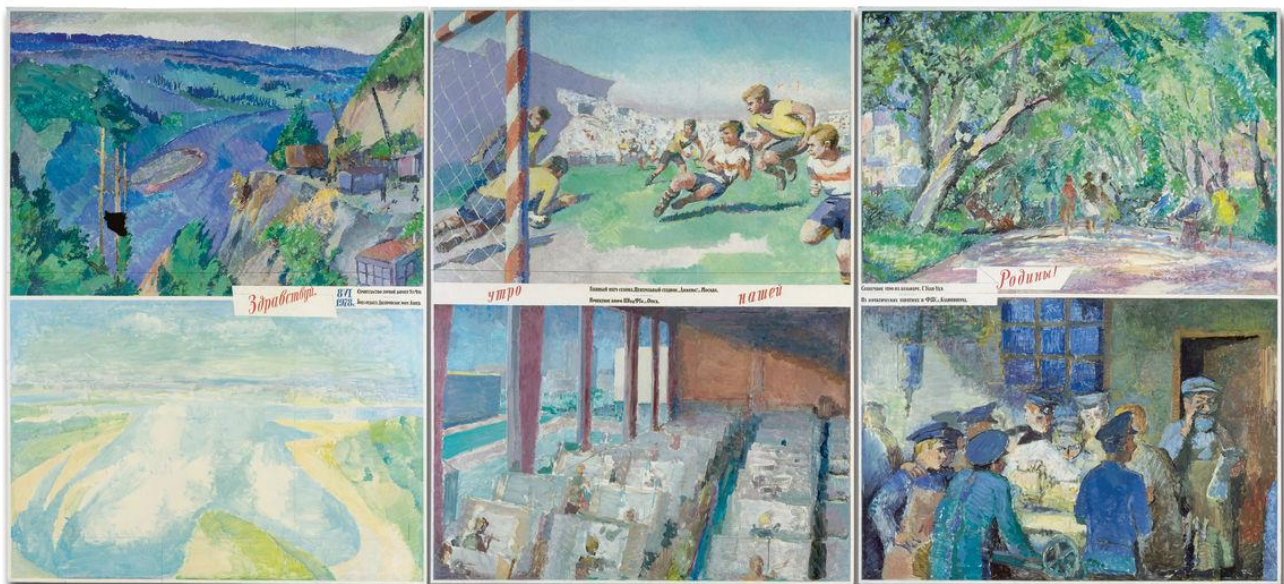


Figure 25: Ilya Kabakov, *Hello, Morning of Our Motherland* (1981)

<sup>134</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, “Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 188.

<sup>135</sup> Renate Petzinger and Emilia Kabakov, eds. *Ilya Kabakov: Paintings = Gemälde: 1957-2008: Catalogue Raisonné*. (Wiesbaden: Museum Wiesbaden, 2008), 122.

<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*

employed artists such as Kabakov on billboards, posters, schedules, instructions, official documents and forms that exerted a fatal control over the life of every Soviet citizen—heightens the sense of disembodiment and anonymity in Kabakov’s works.<sup>137</sup> This anonymity is enhanced by the deliberately anti-aesthetic visual poetics of the work.<sup>138</sup>

Combining references to Western pop-art with references to Soviet ideological symbols and Socialist Realism, Leonid Sokov combined painting and sculpture to create work that deliberately combines both the deskilled and banal to be “poor-quality,”<sup>139</sup> a highly productive technique in both global conceptual art as well as pop-art.<sup>140</sup> Although trained as a sculptor of Socialist Realist monuments, Sokov embraces poor materials in a style that is both satirically humorous as well as carnivalesque, a word defined by Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin as a mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of a dominant style of atmosphere through laughter—a key strategy for both low and folk cultural traditions.<sup>141</sup>

Sokov’s sculpture, *Instrument for Determining Nationality* (1976) [see **figure 26**], embraces this function as it mocks stereotypical notions of



Figure 26: Leonid Sokov, *Instrument for Determining Nationality* (1976)

<sup>137</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, “Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 188.

<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> Boris Groys, “Leonid Sokov: Living in Paradise,” in *Leonid Sokov. Sculpture* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2013), 1-2.

<sup>140</sup> Julia Tulovsky, “Catharsis through Laughter” Popular Culture and the Art of Leonid Sokov,” in *Leonid Sokov. Sculpture* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2013), 10.

<sup>141</sup> *ibid.*

the nasal sizes and shapes of various Soviet nationalities,<sup>142</sup> including Jewish—a heritage claimed by most of the nonconformist artists mentioned in this paper. Thus, the linguistic context of this piece, complete with tongue-in-cheek instructions for its use,<sup>143</sup> is crucial to Sokov's desire to desacralize myths surrounding the multiethnic Soviet state. From the starting point of a cultural myth, Sokov examines, deconstructs, and casts it down from its pedestal by provoking the viewer's laughter that exposes the myth's absurdity.<sup>144</sup> This is not merely satire, for the comical text in Sokov's work originates in the humor of *lubki*, the popularly available prints mass-marketed to working-class Russians in the nineteenth century.<sup>145</sup>

With a similar interest in absurdity, banality, and poor materials, Prigov, who considered himself “a fundamentally democratic artist, unconcerned with ‘creative genius,’” created a series of works out of ordinary tin cans bedecked with typewritten text.<sup>146</sup> *Can of Signatures for the Complete and Unconditional Disarmament of America* (1977-78) [see **figure 27**] is one such piece that features featuring a miniature signboard with the eponymous text. A mass-produced, disposable object, the can initially seems ill-suited to its proposed function as launching pad for the disarmament of a superpower; however, it is precisely this combination of absurd aggressiveness and insufficient means that endows the deskilled object with its quintessentially

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<sup>142</sup> The word *nationality* (*natsional'nost'*) in Russian is the equivalent of *ethnicity* Western society and had to be listed on every Soviet citizen's internal passport. In the case of a child of two parents of different nationalities, either the child or the parent could choose which of the two to list.

<sup>143</sup> *Annotation*: 1) *put your nose in the hole*. 2) *if the angle or volume of the nose coincide, the person to whom the nose belongs to is of that nationality*.

<sup>144</sup> Julia Tulovsky, “Catharsis through Laughter” Popular Culture and the Art of Leonid Sokov,” in *Leonid Sokov: Sculpture* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2013), 10.

<sup>145</sup> Alexandre Gertsman, “Nostalgia and Myth in Russian Art,” in *Remembrance: Russian Post-modern Nostalgia* (New York: IntArt-International Foundation of Russian and Eastern European Art, 2003), 25.

<sup>146</sup> Samuel Goff, “Dmitri Prigov: How the Soviet Union Produced a Genre-defying Artistic Mystic,” *The Calvert Journal*, accessed September 17, 2018, <http://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/9042/dmitri-prigov-how-the-soviet-union-produced-a-genre-defying-artistic-mystic>.

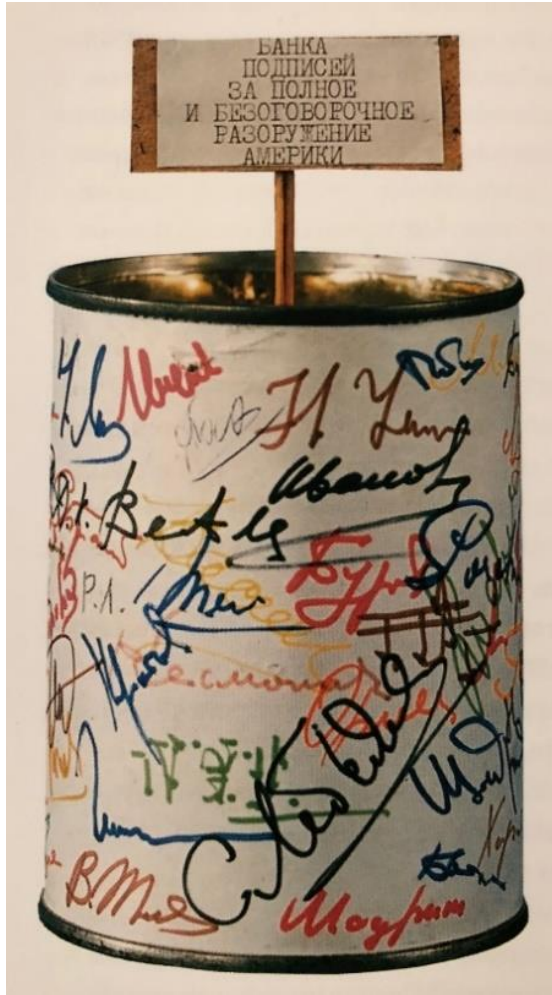


Figure 27: Dmitry Prigov, *Can of Signatures for the Complete and Unconditional Disarmament of America* (1977-78)

Soviet character.<sup>147</sup> Yet again, by creating such a lowly piece of art, scribbled with illegible, anonymous signatures and festooned with a sloppy typewritten text exhortation, Prigov deconstructs the myth of the military and moral superiority of the Soviet Union as a superpower.

As was the case for Komar and Melamid, Soviet slogans and propaganda provided Alexander Kosolapov, a Sots-Art adherent who was one of the first Soviet nonconformists to emigrate, with bountiful fodder for a series of later works combining iconographic signs from Western advertising with Soviet kitsch.<sup>148</sup> Co-opting a concept from his American idol, Andy Warhol, that “the epitome of [American] beauty is McDonalds,”

Kosolapov sought a product that could epitomize

Russian beauty similarly.<sup>149</sup> Yet since the Soviet Union of the early 1970s had no commercial advertising—and certainly no equivalent of McDonalds—Kosolapov borrows a banal domestic phrase, *Sashok! Would you like some tea?* (1975) [see **figure 28**], juxtaposing it on a propaganda-banner-red background with the yellow profile of an anonymous girl whose name,

<sup>147</sup> Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-gardes* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 180.

<sup>148</sup> Alexandre Gertsman, “Nostalgia and Myth in Russian Art,” in *Remembrance: Russian Post-modern Nostalgia* (New York: IntArt-International Foundation of Russian and Eastern European Art, 2003), 24.

<sup>149</sup> *ibid.*





Figure 28: Alexander Kosolapov, *Sashok! Would you like some tea?* (1975)

we might assume, is Sasha.<sup>150</sup> Given the immense popularity of tea-drinking in Russia, the words, a democratic exhortation to enjoy a ubiquitous Soviet ritual, are both familiar and comforting to Soviet viewers in the same way that a slogan or advertisement for a fast food meal might have been to an American audience of the time. The girl's profile, on the other hand, mimics the profile of the Soviet legend Vladimir Lenin, which often appeared on plaques, medals, pins, or other propagandistic articles, completing the comparison and underscoring the work's wry humor.

Nikita Alexeev (b. 1954) worked among a group of younger Moscow Conceptualists who rejected traditional materials and methods of artistic production (i.e. painting, sculpture and assemblage) entirely.<sup>151</sup> Together with a group of peers, the majority of whom lacked a

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<sup>150</sup> *Sashok* is a familial diminutive of *Sasha*, which itself is the diminutive form of either *Alexandra* or *Alexander*, both extremely common Russian names. Since the artist himself also goes by *Sasha*, his anonymization of the subject of this work nonetheless seems to refer back to himself in a tongue-in-cheek way.

<sup>151</sup> Innessa Levkova-Lamm, "Shifting from the Center to the Margins: Moscow Conceptualism, 1980s-1990s," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 104.

professional art education, he formed a cooperative gallery named APTART in his Moscow apartment in 1982.<sup>152</sup> One of the series of works he exhibited there, *Bananas* (1983) [see figure 29], consists of thirty childlike felt-tip pen drawings of Kremlin architecture inscribed with phrases such as “ironic materialism,” “cultural partisanship,” “imposing gaudiness,” “the horror of emptiness,” and “absurd unseriousness.”<sup>153</sup> This direct visualization of otherwise abstract idiomatic expressions is based on a tautology common to conceptual art that “the picture depicts the picture.”<sup>154</sup>



Figure 29: Nikita Alexeev, *Absurd Unseriousness* (from the series *Bananas*), 1983

However, the linguistic content of Alexeev’s work, a kind of speech act that moves the viewer toward understanding it as a score to fill the space, devastates the image representing the supreme bastion of Soviet power.<sup>155</sup>

## Category VII: The Archival Function of Language

In its written form, language is a tool for archiving information, history, and feelings, and its combination with or as image can be applied towards critical or discursive ends. Just as

<sup>152</sup> Margarita Tupitsyn, “Imagine No Shows,” in *Anti-shows: APTART 1982-84* (London: Afterall, 2017), 38.

<sup>153</sup> Innessa Levkova-Lamm, “Shifting from the Center to the Margins: Moscow Conceptualism, 1980s-1990s,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 104.

<sup>154</sup> Ekaterina Bobrinskaya, “Moscow Conceptualism: Its Aesthetics and History,” in *Die Totale Aufklärung: Moskauer Konzeptkunst, 1960-1990* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 56.

<sup>155</sup> Innessa Levkova-Lamm, “Shifting from the Center to the Margins: Moscow Conceptualism, 1980s-1990s,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 104.

conceptual artists in the West were interested in applying this approach in their exploration of text and image (e.g. Hans Haacke's 1971 investigations into the real estate holdings of a New York slumlord), Soviet nonconformist artists were also interested in the use of language to retain information in stasis while creating a critical discourse about the nature of Soviet life on both personal and political levels. This archival impulse reflected their desire to renew connections with the past, to hold inquiry into meaning and put it back.

The Soviet Union was a strictly regimented and highly bureaucratic state where information was equivalent to power. Biographic details of the lives of Soviet citizens were recorded on archival ledgers by functionaries, inscribed either with typewriters or stylistically neutral cursive handwriting. Soviet citizens were obliged to carry internal passports, similar in layout, form and content to Kabakov's *Sobakin*. Nevertheless, as the crux of that painting suggests, Russians were deeply skeptical of such archives of information and doubted whether they could capture the essence of a human life or even convey an accurate portrayal of recent history, which had, like the work of the historical avant-garde, been essentially rewritten or erased from memory for politically expedient purposes.

Kabakov's *Carrying out the Garbage* (1980)<sup>156</sup> [see figure 30] is one of a number of paintings by Kabakov that reflect the absurd nature of the Soviet bureaucracy and its cycle of social and economic development, which from the beginning had been laid out in ambitious yet oftentimes unrealistic five-year plans. Boris Groys describes it as a work that “heralded the inevitability of death—the greatest bureaucrat and at the same time the greatest artist of all time—taking

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<sup>156</sup> This painting would also lay the groundwork for Kabakov's further thematic interest in garbage as well as for one of his better-known total installations, *The Garbage Man (The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away)* (1988-1995), currently in the collection of the Nasjonalmuseet in Oslo.




<div>За чистоту!</div> <div></div>	<div>Расписание</div> <div>выноса полойного бедера по дому № 24 подъезд № 6</div> <div>улица и.м. В. Бардина ЖЭЭ № 8 Бауманского р-на.</div>											
	1979 г.	Январь Февраль	Март Апрель	Май Июнь	Июль Август	Сентябрь Октябрь	Ноябрь Декабрь					
	13 31 31 28	Прохоров М.А. №16 Буркова А.С. №17 Титман О.В. №18 Забобва И.В. №19	15 31 31 30	Солод Е.С. №20 Акимченко Е.А. №21 Зусман И.С. №22 Сорокин И.П. №23	15 31 31 30	Лапин И.С. №24 Сизова И.В. №25 Панченко М.С. №26 Коль С.А. №27	15 31 31 31	Лобчук С.Е. №20 Силиной Л.П. №29 Прохоров М.А. №16 Буркова А.С. №17	15 31 31 31	Титман О.В. №18 Забобва И.В. №19 Солод Е.С. №20 Акимченко Е.А. №21	15 31 31 31	Зусман И.С. №22 Сорокин И.П. №23 Лапин И.С. №24 Сизова И.В. №25
	1980 г.	Январь Февраль	Март Апрель	Май Июнь	Июль Август	Сентябрь Октябрь	Ноябрь Декабрь					
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	1981 г.	Январь Февраль	Март Апрель	Май Июнь	Июль Август	Сентябрь Октябрь	Ноябрь Декабрь					
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	1982 г.	Январь Февраль	Март Апрель	Май Июнь	Июль Август	Сентябрь Октябрь	Ноябрь Декабрь					
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	1983 г.	Январь Февраль	Март Апрель	Май Июнь	Июль Август	Сентябрь Октябрь	Ноябрь Декабрь					
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	1984 г.	Январь Февраль	Март Апрель	Май Июнь	Июль Август	Сентябрь Октябрь	Ноябрь Декабрь					
	13 31 31 28	Лапин И.С. №24 Сизова И.В. №25 Панченко М.С. №26 Коль С.А. №27	15 31 31 30	Лобчук С.Е. №20 Силиной Л.П. №29 Прохоров М.А. №16 Акимченко Е.А. №21	15 31 31 30	Титман О.В. №18 Забобва И.В. №19 Солод Е.С. №20 Акимченко Е.А. №21	15 31 31 31	Зусман И.С. №22 Сорокин И.П. №23 Лапин И.С. №24 Сизова И.В. №25	15 31 31 31	Панченко М.С. №26 Коль С.А. №27 Лобчук С.Е. №20 Силиной Л.П. №29	15 31 31 31	Прохоров М.А. №16 Буркова А.С. №17 Акимченко Е.А. №21 Забобва И.В. №19

Figure 30: Ilya Kabakov, *Carrying out the Garbage* (1980)

everything living and filing it away, archiving it and making it a museum-piece forever.”<sup>157</sup> Here, carefully laid out in black cursive script on a white background is a grid that lists, in precise detail, the names and apartment numbers of the residents of building who are supposed to take out the garbage for the next six years. Mimicking the style of one of a number of hand-painted announcement boards that were common in government-owned apartment buildings, *Carrying out the Garbage* assumes the function as a archival register of responsibilities, which each individual could plainly see on which days he or she would be expected to fulfill this lowly and inglorious task. Not considered by the anonymous draftsman of this schedule is the question of whether all of the residents listed—or even the building itself—would still be around in five

<sup>157</sup> Boris Groys, “The Moveable Cave, or Kabakov’s Self-memorials,” in *Ilya Kabakov* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 70.

years' time. The formal monotony of the script on the canvas is broken in one corner by the image of a slop bucket and an optimistic slogan, "For Cleanliness!" Kabakov himself explained his work in the context of the Soviet obsession with arranging and archiving even the most insignificant information:

...in the Soviet Union, control, inventory, and most importantly, incessant directing, forbidding, permitting, instructing were rendered in this way and covered the entire space of both personal and public life, permeating each of its cells. This textual and numerical world that was oversaturated with bureaucratic, highly detailed information was addressed to some mythical person who was supposed to read all of this and keep it in mind. But no one ever saw this person, although everyone knew he exists.

Other interesting investigations into the notion of archiving lyrical thoughts and ideas were undertaken by Rimma Gerlovina. Around 1972 she began avant-garde inspired text and image experimentations by typing her prose into specific patters; she then moved on to scores of visual poetry intended for simultaneous reading by several voices, arranged in a sort of spoken opera.<sup>158</sup> By 1974 she was creating small labeled cardboard boxes covered with fabric, *Cube-Poems* (mid-1970s) [see **figure 31**], that like the work of other



Figure 31: Rimma Gerlovina, *I Think Someone is Looking at Us from Behind. I Feel That, Too.*, from the series *Cube-Poems* (mid-1970s)

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<sup>158</sup> Rimma Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin, "Trespassing," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 320-321

nonconformist artists, combine elements of visual art, poetry and performance, underscoring a shift towards a view of language as a system of signs and symbols.<sup>159</sup> Measuring approximately 8 centimeters square, each cube, an allegorical unit of time, space or human character, bore short conceptual phrases both inside and out. Thus, the work speaks in a lyrical voice, a symbolic language on the border between poetry and art, with “a gift for communicating abstruse arguments to intelligent laymen.”<sup>160</sup>

Each of Gerlovina’s cubes is an allegorical unit of time, space or human nature. Intended to be opened by viewers, who read the work’s verdict inside, the cube preserves the symbolic truth of an inquiry, even as the direct linguistic messages are liable to twist their meaning somewhat, just as symbols and shapes cover the truth with a veil in both mythology and art.<sup>161</sup> Gerlovina has noted that cubes have traditionally symbolized the material substance of the world, in which a hidden creative force, represented by the words inside them, operates.<sup>162</sup> With a healthy dose of humor, Gerlovina creates dialogues between the public message on the outside of the cube and the hidden, inner voice inside. Unlike the precise, concrete information contained in a government archive, these material manifestations of poetic thought preserve their ambiguity while speaking with metaphorical clarity about the mysteries of the human soul.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Yevgeny Barabanov, “Moscow Conceptualism: Between Self-Definition and Doctrine,” *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 62.

<sup>160</sup> Rimma Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin, “Trespassing,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 321.

<sup>161</sup> Rimma Gerlovina and Valerij Gerlovin, *Koncepty* (Moskva: Biblioteka Moskovskogo Konceptualizma Germana Titova, 2012), 15.

<sup>162</sup> *ibid*, 320-321.

<sup>163</sup> *ibid*, 321.

Grisha Bruskin (b. 1945) was one of the most prominent second-generation Moscow

Conceptualists who wowed the Western art world as one of the young stars of the July 1988

Sotheby's auction in Moscow. His three-part series of polyptych paintings, *Fundamental Lexicon* (1984-1986) featured prominently

there, fetching top dollar. As one of the few Soviet nonconformists who overtly wove elements of Jewish mysticism into his work, Bruskin melded his literary and artistic practices to create a rich array of visual characters to populate his paintings. Inspired by the Soviet mania for Socialist



Figure 32: Grisha Bruskin, *Fundamental Lexicon, Part III* (1986)

Realist sculptures, these characters appear, often with defining accoutrements and placards in bold color, side-by-side in a grid-like formation but frozen, like fragments of a never-ending book that one could keep adding to.<sup>164</sup> Portraying a collection of Soviet archetypes (e.g. worker, doctor, patient, prisoner, pioneer), each representing an ideological myth of the times,

<sup>164</sup> Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 188.



*Fundamental Lexicon, Part III* (1986) [see **figure 32**] is an attempt to collect and categorize and entire system; an entomological undertaking similar to arranging a collection of butterflies, a comparison that Bruskin makes himself:

Working on *Fundamental Lexicon*, I was like an entomologist who catches butterflies, put them out with ether, straightens their wings, and then fastens them with pins to backing. After this he arranges his treasures in boxes, adding texts that describe and classify them.<sup>165</sup>

Bruskin's idea behind the piece was to document and archive the myth of the Soviet pursuit of communism—a myth that the art of Socialist Realism had created—by creating a Rosetta Stone allowing future generations to decode important knowledge about the myth and the world that it had created.<sup>166</sup> This has proved especially important, as the Soviet Union has now ceased to exist. Speaking more broadly about the legacy of Moscow Conceptualists like Bruskin, Robert Storr writes:

Ironically, Russian conceptualism of the sixties through the eighties is among the most revealing representations of that reality we have left. Archaeological digging into government and Communist Party files already has and will in all likelihood continue to produce heretofore hidden information, and museums will warehouse artifacts of the Soviet era for future generations to study. But nowhere will the deep structures of the Soviet experience be better preserved than in these travesties of and riddling responses to the language and iconography of the State."<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Grisha Bruskin, "The Universe on the Table, or *The Twilight of the Gods*," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 376.

<sup>166</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> Robert Storr, "Across the Great Divide," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 256.

## CHAPTER 4 – CONCLUSIONS

Boris Groys writes that Moscow Conceptualism was, like many other art movements of the 1960s and 1970s, de facto a return to realism.<sup>168</sup> Both the Soviet Union and the world at large had changed so drastically from realism's heyday in the nineteenth century that many artists sought to take bold, conceptual steps to reconnect with their immediate present, which like everyone's present time is an ever-changing reality. Yet the situation in Russia was unique, given that Socialist Realism had long been wedded to unrealistic ideals and thus was even more divorced from the reality of the late Soviet period, when artists could not openly raise questions about the discrepancies between the two.

With limited room for experimentation in the realm of official art, and given the absence of any semblance of an art market where artistic experimentation could be publicly assessed and critiqued, Soviet nonconformist artists were incapable of addressing their full range of true emotions—what Russians refer to as the life of the soul—without resorting to language of some sort on a level equal to the picture field. Their true feelings and experiences were incongruent with the message portrayed in the surrounding visual landscape, as littered as it was with propaganda slogans that they did not believe in, bureaucratic procedures that belittled and vexed them, and dominated by Socialist Realist posters and artworks that, ironically, many of them had been trained, as lifetime employees of a socialist state, to create. Life did not resemble their art, nor did art resemble their life as artists and citizens of the totalitarian Soviet Union: it had been coopted by other aims, which had strayed far from the idealistic, utopian roots that the state had promulgated.

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<sup>168</sup> Boris Groys, *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010), 1.

Nevertheless, nonconformists succeeded, by combining word and text with image in their unofficial art, to shift from the concept of “art as object” to “art as idea.” Their link to the historic avant-garde had been broken yet—thanks both to a brief period of liberalization during the Khrushchev Thaw as well as an enduring bridge with Russian avant-garde poetry—not entirely severed. Their text-and-image artworks sought to break down barriers between word, sign and sound, as well as between various expressive divergent artforms—including literature, performance, and the visual arts. Placing word and text on the picture field, they addressed everyday themes—often absurd and banal—that could not be addressed by official state-sanctioned art. They raised questions about authorship and what an artwork can or should be, and they created new myths and narratives to challenge existing and long stagnant ones about the role of the artist in society.

Freed from the necessity of unrealistically depicting their world as an ideal utopia, nonconformist artists could assume the mantles of mystics, critics, researchers, poets and authors of their actual reality. They could deconstruct the state’s myths, both satirically and subtly, by appropriating the language and images of their surroundings and recombining them to create new messages and meaning. They could reestablish the continuum of avant-garde practices that had been shattered under Stalin’s iron grip while planting themselves firmly into the canon of twentieth-century Russian art. They could break free from the constraints that the Soviet art scene and society at large had placed on them and finally feel free to depict the life of the Russian soul of the late Soviet era as they saw fit. Thus, they preserved for all time a unique record of a failed utopian society that did not finally accept them as true artists until it had all but collapsed.



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